

2019

The Nineteenth Century British Workhouse: Mission Not Accomplished

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**THE NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH WORKHOUSE:
MISSION NOT ACCOMPLISHED**

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in
Humanities and Cultural Studies.

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May, 2019

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the undergraduate program, has been presented to and accepted by the (*Faculty of the Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts?*) The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

How to correct poverty in a society is extremely complex. In the nineteenth century, the British struggled to house, feed and care for the unemployed and destitute men, women and children created by the Industrial Revolution. Many in the upper classes considered poverty a moral failure, yet they had little impetus to end it. Poverty, as defined by an inability to provide for one's needs due to a variety of factors, was seen as necessary, for without it there would be no motivation for the lower classes to work and provide a luxurious life for the wealthy.

Although some in government argued that the basic needs of the poor (such as, nutrition, housing, and medical care) could be provided through outdoor relief, others contended that the poor should labor for any assistance they received through a form of indoor aid called the workhouse system. This paper examines the mission of the workhouse and 1) the implementation of work as punishment, 2) the institution of harsh rules in the workhouse, 3) the restrictions to personal freedoms, and 4) the overall treatment of workhouse inmates. The environment in the workhouse was so demeaning, cruel, and dangerous that it often defeated the mission of the workhouse system to sustain the populace it was built to support.

Evidence of the failure to fulfill its mission is found in an analysis of primary sources such as workhouse guardians' reports, letters from inmates, statements from medical examiners as well as other first-hand written accounts from occupants of the workhouse. In addition, a review of scholarly articles, literature, satirical cartoons, paintings and newspaper accounts from the time confirm that conditions in the workhouse did not match those expected from its mission statement.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following individuals whose time and expertise helped me craft my senior thesis:

Patricia Dougherty, O.P. Professor Emerita of History, for introducing me to the workhouses of Britain through her class Victoria, Napoleon and Bismarck, and for guiding me through the entire senior thesis process.

Dr. Chase Clow, for her extensive knowledge of thesis preparation and belief in my work.

Aaron Richardson, Research Librarian at Dominican for his brilliant introduction to research services and help locating historical documents.

Michael Pujals for always being available to answer questions regarding copyright legalities and other library materials.

Professor Matt Rodriguez, for introducing me to Community Service and its boundless possibilities.

Shaun Marshall, Director of Ritter House, for his passion for social service and for giving me the opportunity to work with homeless individuals on a personal basis.

My son, Jacob Derin, a fellow college student, who helped me organize my concepts into a cohesive paper.

My friends, Daliah Neuberger, Orah Sholin and Valerie Trautman, who helped proofread my thesis and discuss ideas.

My husband Lee Derin for his unwavering support and love, late night edits and indispensable historical and cultural insights.

Without all of these people, this paper would not have been possible.

Preface

I initially became interested in the history of British workhouses through my coursework with Sister Patricia Dougherty at Dominican University of California. In her class, “Victoria, Napoleon and Bismark,” I learned about the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution and how it affected the poor. Living in the Bay Area for the past 60 years has given me a unique perspective on the poor and the homelessness that is a part of many of their lives. I have seen the past five well-meaning mayors of San Francisco, Art Agnos, Frank Jordan, Willie Brown, Gavin Newsome and Ed Lee create their own programs on how to solve the issue. And yet, it continues.

Through my Service Learning Coursework at Dominican, I chose to volunteer at the Ritter Center where I dispensed food to the homeless. Through that experience I learned that showing respect, dignity, kindness and a warm smile to someone who is down on their luck is often just as important as giving them a can of chili. However, combating homelessness cannot be done merely through compassion, it must be accomplished through action. It is a complex and persistent issue with no easy solution.

Poverty endures. In January, 2019, our federal legislature was in shambles. The government had shut down and people were going without paychecks. President Donald Trump demanded 5 billion dollars to build a border wall to supposedly keep United States citizens safe from “illegal immigrants” who were supposedly stealing job opportunities from American workers. As Trump said in July 2015, “They’re taking our jobs. They’re taking our manufacturing jobs. They’re taking our money. They’re killing us.”¹ But why is the president of the wealthiest nation on earth so worried about people stealing backbreaking work such as gutting-fish, working in farm fields or scrubbing floors? Our government wishes to have a

surplus of punishing, menial jobs available for its own poorest citizens so they can no longer claim access to government subsidies such as unemployment and Section 8 housing. Many rich citizens of the United States wish the majority of the poor citizens to remain uneducated and shivering in dilapidated schools without art or music courses designed to stimulate creativity and creative acumen. Without instruction it is impossible to learn about the abuses of unscrupulous wall street brokers and financiers. It frightens those in power to think that the exhausted, uneducated, minimum wage workers might rise up and demand to know how the wealthiest onepercent of citizens use their power to circumvent paying their fair share of taxes.

Issues such as housing, feeding and employing citizens are handed down through the ages, in countries all over the world. Stereotypes abound as to the type of people who are homeless, or on some sort of government-subsidized welfare. Many are seen as shiftless, lazy, stupid, drug addicted or criminal. Most contemporary American politicians agree that it is in the best interest of the poor to make any type of public service, such as Medicaid (healthcare), CalFresh/SNAP (Food), Section 8: Housing Choice Voucher Program, funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (affordable housing) incumbent upon the recipients working in some capacity. Indeed, in Kentucky, the state where most of my family resides, an article in the *Washington Post*, proclaimed, “A day after the Trump administration announced that it would allow states to compel poor people on Medicaid to work or get ready for jobs, federal health officials on Friday granted Kentucky permission to impose those requirements.”² Their governor argued that helping people find work would “lead them out of poverty and government dependence, ultimately improving Kentuckians’ subpar health status.” 350,000 Medicare recipients were to be subject to the community engagement requirement to work at least 80 hours per month, volunteer, or be in job training. Brad Woodhouse, director of

Protect our Care Campaign, a pro-ACA group in which many alumni of the Obama administration are involved, said that the federal agency's decision "marks not just a shift in policy, but a shift in the fundamental decency of the United States changing Medicaid will do nothing to help Americans find jobs. It will merely take away their health care."³

One of the first reactions of an industrialized society to strained economic conditions is to propose solutions that place an emphasis of the rights of the wealthy versus the poor; this includes requiring people to work in order to receive aid. In Britain of the nineteenth century, with thousands of people homeless and potentially starving, The Poor Law Commission of 1834 proposed that no aid could be given to anyone unless they could be monitored in a workhouse where they would be forced to work. Using architectural models based on strict prison systems, they could literally watch over the patrons to make sure they were not getting food and shelter in exchange for nothing. As this paper will show, when the poor have no power to change their circumstances, and when permission is given to incompetent, cruel and often criminal overseers to treat patrons of workhouses as they will, abuse runs rampant. The poor can obtain power through the vote.

In the 1830's, British men could not vote unless they had at least 10 pounds worth of property; this did not change until people protested. When the majority of male citizens in Britain got the vote through the 1918 Representation of the People Act, things improved. When all women got the vote 10 years later, things got even better.⁴ Having a vote means that you can and do deserve to be heard. It is a sign of respect. It shows that as a member of your country, your opinion is valued. When masses of people vote to change a situation, it will change.

Whether mandatory workhouses were created out of compassion and a sense of religious duty to the poor, or to maintain a healthy society in case of war, or to prevent paupers from rising

up in rebellion against their mistreatment, this paper does not seek to judge the men and women who shaped a punishing workhouse system as a potential solution for poverty. Indeed, the bonds of ethical relativism – the theory that morality is relative to the norms of one’s culture – must constrain contemporary sensibilities.⁵ However, having been the beneficiary of contemporary American cultural morality, one based upon the ideal that all people have inalienable human rights, that they are worthy of respect and equality no matter what their class, race or religion, and that they have the right to be heard and to vote, makes me grateful to have been born in the twentieth century.

Today, the workhouses are gone, remnants of a time when economics superseded compassion. Reviewing history allows us not to repeat the same mistakes. Hopefully, there will never be another workhouse. A system that overarchingly lacks respect for an individual’s rights, corrodes human dignity and self worth, does not nourish or sustain its patrons and demonizes the very people it is supposed to assist is not the answer.

Introduction

How can a goal be achieved if your objectives and methods are diametrically opposed to your mission? According to the 1836 Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales, the purported purpose of a British workhouse was “to supply the inmates... with wholesome food and sufficient clothing, a better bed than they are used to lie upon, a cleaner, and a better ventilated room than they are used to inhabit, an immediate supply of medical attendance in case of illness, and to establish a degree of order and cleanliness unknown in a labourer’s [sic] cottage.”⁶ Yet, the rule of “Less Eligibility,” a British government policy, passed into law with the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 stated that conditions in workhouses had to be worse than those outside so that there was some deterrence to claiming poor relief.⁷ Workhouses were to dissuade paupers from claiming aid and make conditions wretched for them if they did.

This dual and conflicting attitude towards regulating poverty was doomed to failure from the beginning. In order to receive charity, applicants gave up their rights to personal freedom, and were subjected to an establishment that completely oversaw their lives. Workhouses scheduled the type of work to be done and its duration, disallowed husbands and wives as well as families from living in the same quarters, and doled out a subsistence level of food, shelter and medical attention. Complaints or infractions on the part of the clients were met with harsh rules and punishment. This paper shows that preventable accidents, tedious labor, substandard medical care, and the overall treatment of workhouse inmates led to an environment that was so demeaning, cruel, and dangerous that workhouses often could not sustain the care of their patrons. In 1846 the reflections of one Mr. Witt, a resident of St. Pancras workhouse stated, “He would ‘sooner die under a hedge,’ when it pleased God to take him, than stay in the

workhouse.”⁸ Liza Picard writes in *Victorian London*, “To enter the workhouse meant giving up all self-respect, and abandoning family ties. It was dreaded with unimaginable fear.”⁹ The institution became so reviled and hated that the word “workhouse” actually became a pejorative. Charles Dickens used this knowledge in his novel *Oliver* when the nasty character, Noah Claypole, demeans and taunts the orphaned Oliver by referring to him as “Work’us” [from the workhouse].¹⁰ The building itself became known as a “spike” referencing a tool often used for the brutal task of “picking oakum,” a brutal form of labor forced on many inmates.¹¹

There are few of us today that would agree to such conditions, and fewer still that would advocate for it. However, with desperation nipping at the heels of destitute Victorians, many did enter the workhouse. Derek Fraser writes in *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, that excluding periods of economic distress, it has been estimated that about 6.5% of the British population may have been accommodated in workhouses at any given time.¹² According to a British census conducted by the statistician John Rickman, in 1831 there were 23.9 million people living in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Thus there were about 1,553,500 people living in workhouses. To put that in perspective, that is more than the 1.3 million counted in the 2019 population of San Diego, California.¹³

This paper examines why the workhouses of the 1800s were established and asks if the mission statement to support the destitute was accomplished. The paper is divided into three chapters. Chapter One discusses the history of the workhouse, and delves into the relationship between the poor and the wealthy in Britain’s Christian Nation of the nineteenth century. It culminates in the debate within Parliament over the ramifications of passing The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which stipulated the construction of mandatory workhouses as the only form of poor relief available to the masses.

Chapter Two explains the conditions people faced when entering the workhouse before and after adoption of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. It also puts forth a presumed mission statement of the workhouses that was suggested in 1836 by the Parliamentary Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners. This report states the main objective of all workhouse rules and regulations was to provide 1) wholesome food, sufficient clothing, 2) a decent bed, 3) a clean and ventilated room, 4) an immediate supply of medical attendance in case of illness, and 5) to establish a degree of order and cleanliness.

Chapter Three explores the depiction of the workhouse through illustration, sketch and novel, and discusses how those artists illustrated the inability of the workhouse to achieve its mission to sustain the people in a humane way.

The Conclusion presents a commentary on the facts presented and shows that the Mission Statement of the workhouses was not met.

I. HISTORY OF THE WORKHOUSE

Poor Relief in a Christian Nation

“The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate” - *Cecil Frances Alexander, Hymns for Little Children*, 1850

The stanza referenced above is a seemingly innocuous Anglican hymn by Cecil Frances Alexander; however, it encapsulates the Victorian British zeitgeist towards class structure, which was divinely ordained through birth.¹⁴ And for all citizens of an Anglican nation, their desire to uphold Christian morals propelled them to take personal responsibility towards others less fortunate. As the book of Proverbs instructs, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”¹⁵ Indeed, if they shirked their duty towards the poor, they only had to wait until Sunday church services to hear a pastor read them a letter from the apostle James about how they would suffer in hell: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you... You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter...”¹⁶ To willingly give charity was considered the proper way of helping the underprivileged.

However, after the reformation and the creation of the Church of England, many voluntary expectations for delivering charity were discontinued and resident landowners and ratepayers were required to pay taxes to their local parishes.¹⁷ The parishes in turn distributed these funds in several ways. The first was “outdoor relief” which meant giving a dole of money on which the person could live and stay in their own home. The second was to give the parishioner “relief in kind” – clothes and food for example. Or third, the parish could provide some sort of “indoor relief” where the poor could be taken into a local almshouse, be admitted to

a hospital or taken to an orphanage. The idle poor that were able to work, and who were known by the local ratepayers personally, would be taken to a workhouse where they would be set to work.¹⁸ Because the parish knew each individual intimately, it was easier to assess who actually needed help.

For many years, the system seemed sufficient to address the direst needs of an impoverished family. However, a confluence of factors during the Industrial Revolution rendered the system unsustainable. Overpopulation due to earlier marriages, couples having larger families so they could send their children to work to supplement the family income, and increased medical knowledge which helped babies to live, all contributed to a multitude of people that threatened to overwhelm the overburdened poor relief system.¹⁹ Some estimates suggest that between 1750 and 1850, the population in England more than doubled.²⁰ Simultaneously, new technology was developed that replaced agricultural workers and displaced them from jobs they had held for generations. Due to a series of laws entitled the Enclosure Acts, thousands of people became homeless as they were thrown off land that had been held in common.²¹ Soldiers returning from the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 could not find work. In addition, a series of bad harvests occurred causing grain prices to rise.²²

Thousands of people suffering from hunger and homelessness uprooted and left their local villages, descending upon urban areas in hopes of finding work. Most of them wound up begging for charity either on the streets, or at unfamiliar parish doors. Ratepayers bristled at having to care for so many indigent people whom they did not know or trust and challenged the old poor law system on the grounds that mismanagement and inefficiency were rampant.²³ Any personal relationship that an individual peasant once had with the proverbial Lord of the Manor or a parish official was gone, along with any village identity or respect. People were now

classified into categories: impotent poor, able bodied poor, idle poor, vagrant, beggar and vagabond.²⁴ Accusations of laziness, disruption, low morals and unwillingness to pull oneself up “by their bootstraps” were thrown at the masses, and it became *de rigueur* by many in society to deride their plight.²⁵

Scholar David Englander notes that during the nineteenth century, to enter the workhouse was a public admission of moral and personal failure.²⁶ A *mea culpa* attitude by the poor was desired by the rich as it might discourage the use of public funds. The upper classes impressed “upon the ... population that economic security was an individual obligation in the natural order of the economic market.”²⁷

Mathematician and moralist Thomas Malthus’ grim ideas about overpopulation and the inability of the human race to stop procreating faster than the environment could handle the growth potentially threatened to destroy mandatory poor relief altogether. Written in 1798, his most famous work, “An Essay on the Principle of Population,” stated that there is a built-in agony to human existence, in that the growth of a population will always outrun its ability to feed itself.²⁸ He stated further, “The perpetual tendency in the race of man to increase beyond the means of subsistence is one of the general laws of animated nature which we can have no reason to expect will change.”²⁹ He therefore stipulated that the poor laws of England may have alleviated a little of the intensity of individual misfortune, but they spread the general evil [of giving out aid and food] over a much larger surface. He had little respect for “the labouring [sic] poor,” whom he said always seemed to live from hand to mouth. Malthus wrote that food wasted in poorhouses upon “a part of the society that cannot in general be considered as the most valuable part, diminishes the shares that would otherwise belong to more industrious and more

worthy members.”³⁰ His perspective that the poor had little importance was reprehensible, yet it was mirrored in the voices of many of the time.

Patrick Colquhoun, a statistician and magistrate who also acted as a cotton and muslin lobbyist to the British Government, summed up the thoughts of many who felt that there was nothing to be done about poverty – that it was an inevitable and, in fact, desired facet of society. In his “A Treatise on Indigence,” written in 1806, Colquhoun states:

Poverty is therefore a most necessary and indispensable ingredient in society, without which nations and communities could not exist in a state of civilization. It is the lot of man — it is the source of wealth, since without it there would be no labour [sic], and without labour [sic] there could be no riches, no refinement, no comfort, and no benefit to those who may be possessed of wealth.³¹

There was little relief available and English streets teemed with filth, crime, sickness, and despair. Well-to-do congregants no longer needed sermons to conjure up scenes of hell – they were all around them – such as this rookery (slum) described by Charles Dickens in *Oliver Twist*:

...rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem to be too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter... dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations, every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage: all these ornament the banks of Jacob’s Island.³²

Over-population, unemployment, poverty, crime, and illnesses due to overcrowding became chronic issues; scholars, social reformers, editors, clerics, landowners, and elected officials all weighed in with their views on poverty. Almost everyone agreed that something had to be done. It was within this environment that mandatory parish workhouses were established.

The Debate over the Creation of Mandatory Workhouses

The workhouse law! The workhouse law! The devil fetched it in his claw
 From dens, where fiends their imps torment And flung it in our parliament.
 [‘The Workhouse Song, Hereby Ordained to be Sung in all Union Beer-Shops
 Throughout the Queendom, to the Tune of the “Devil’s Own.”’]³³

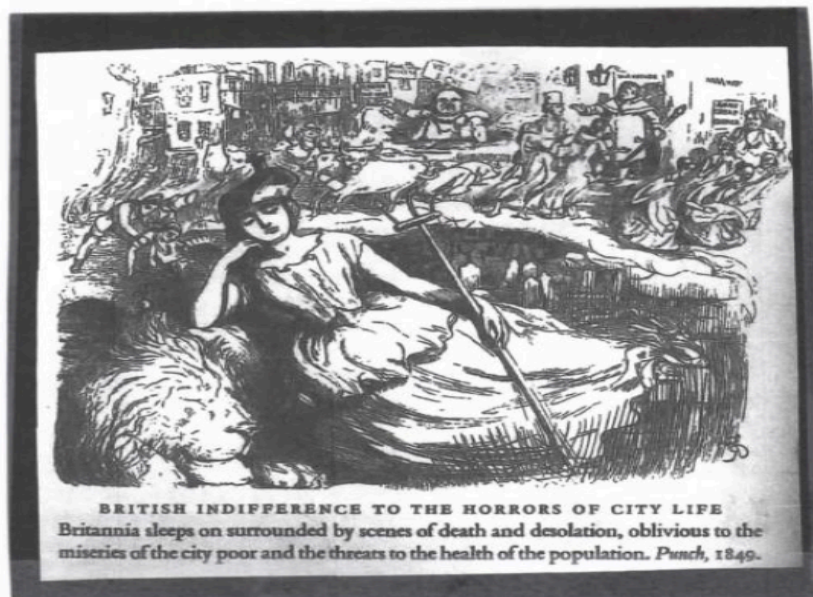


Fig. 1. *British Indifference to the Horrors of City Life*, *Punch*, 1849. As printed in *Victorian People: In life and in literature*, Gillian Avery, 1970, Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, New York, 1970, p 174.

With misery, joblessness and poverty being faced by a large percentage of the population, it did not take long for contemporary satirical magazines, such as *Punch*, to publish cartoons with symbolic representations of destitution and political commentary that could easily be understood without the purchaser being able to read. During the height of the Industrial Revolution, 1770-1850, literacy rates were low in Britain as child labor increased and children were less likely to go to school.³⁴ Decrying the appalling conditions in Britain, these magazines reflected popular sentiment that the electorate was sadly becoming numb to the endemic homelessness and misery. In her book, *Victorian People: In life and in literature*, Gillian Avery shares one such illustration, “British Indifference to the Horrors of City Life” (Figure 1).³⁵

The caption reads, “Britannia sleeps on surrounded by scenes of death and desolation, oblivious to the miseries of the city poor and the threats to the health of the population.” The illustration shows the goddess Britannia – the main symbol of the British empire - holding a royal scepter while she rests on a lion. Around her there is desperation and despair. A stonebreaker with an ax is pulled from the river where he has collapsed from exhaustion. Desperate parents plead with a workhouse warden to be admitted. Seamstresses sew for hours on end watched by a strict boss. As compelling as these drawings were, their attempts to prompt action were stymied by a lack of easy solutions.

Joanne de Pennington, a historian of the nineteenth century, discusses the issues everyone grappled with while trying to understand and explain poverty:

Was it because of personal misfortune, because of social circumstances beyond an individual's control, or, the direct result of a person's character, their laziness and indolence? Were the poor, therefore, “deserving” or “undeserving”? Who was responsible for those who became so poor that they could not maintain themselves and how should these paupers be cared for?³⁶

Finally, in 1832, Prime Minister Earl Grey set up a Royal Poor Law Commission to examine the working of the poor law system in Britain and make recommendations for its improvement.³⁷ The group included Nassau Senior, a professor from Oxford University who was against the allowance system, and Edwin Chadwick, who was a Benthamite.³⁸ Questionnaires were sent out, and over 3,000 parishes (out of a total of 15,000) were visited in order to collect information about the efficacy of establishing mandatory workhouses for the idle poor.³⁹ The results of the questionnaires were sent to Parliament in the form of the *Poor Law Commissioner's Report of 1834*.⁴⁰ Written by Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick, this Report created the basis for the Poor Amendment Act of 1834 that stipulated mandatory workhouses as the only form of charity to be made available.

Gilbert's Act of 1782 empowered parishes to provide a workhouse exclusively for children, the aged, the infirmed, and impotent, (i.e., those individuals who were not able to maintain themselves by their Labor.)⁴¹ Scholar Samantha Shave believes that workhouses, built before the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, cannot be compared to those established after its passage:

The role of the workhouse in Gilbert's unions – or parishes – was premised on diametrically opposed principles to that of post-1834 workhouses: A Gilbert's workhouse was intended to be a source of care, not deterrence.⁴²

These new workhouses would be different. These would have strict rules, regulations, and minimal food or comfort. Families would be separated, including husbands, wives and children, and they would all live in separate wings of the building where they could be easily supervised. Each adult would be required to work and, if under a certain age, attend school. Sunday church service was required, no matter what the religion of the patron. Morals would be taught and idleness punished.

Not everyone agreed with these stipulations. In Parliament, those skilled in the art of polemics debated the report and the efficacy of establishing mandatory workhouses while vehemently denouncing the other side. William Cobbett of Oldham, both a Member of Parliament (MP) for the Liberal Party and a radical, did not like the idea of families being separated in the workhouses, and warned the legislators in the House of Commons that in passing the Poor Law Amendment Act, "They were about to dissolve the bonds of society."⁴³ In contrast, Mr. Robert Slaney, a member of the Whig party, approved of the new conditions and contended that no subject had ever been submitted to the Legislature which had been more attentively examined by the House and the country than the present:

For the sake of the poor and humble classes of the community, and if the House was constituted of those who were truly the Representatives of the people, they must be

desirous of bettering the condition of the labouring [sic] classes, they should at once pass either this or some other Bill equally efficient... he was satisfied that it would have the effect of enabling the industrious poor to better their situation, and would, at the same time, afford great relief to the landed interest.⁴⁴

George De Evans, also a member of the Whig party, wondered whether some portion of the evil might not be attributed to the neglect of the moral education of the poor, on the part of the upper classes. He was surprised to find no allusion to these points in the voluminous reports submitted to the House.⁴⁵

The result of the debates was the passage of the *Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834*. The Act established that all 15,000 parishes in England and Wales were to form into Poor Law Unions, each with its own workhouse and supervised by about 600 locally elected boards of guardians with each board having its own workhouse.⁴⁶ A new government department, the Poor Law Commission, was set up in London, and centralized the disbursement of funds. This would be the only place where all the indigent from the region would go to work and receive aid. The size of workhouses varied, with the smallest such as Belford in Northumberland housing fifty inmates, while the largest such as Liverpool could be home for several thousand.⁴⁷ Author Richard Kelly who has edited a new version of *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens writes, “In fact, it removed the dole that supplemented wages, broke up homes, and forced into the workhouse the old, the infirm, the orphaned, unmarried mothers, the physically and mentally ill – along with the idle, drunkards, and prostitutes.”⁴⁸ Tax monies or charity given to local parishes were now only to be dispensed with through the approval of the Royal Commissioners established under the 1834 law. And only residents of the prospective parish could apply to the workhouse for relief. Article 52 of the Poor Law Amendment Act states:

Be it further enacted, That from and after the passing of this Act it shall be lawful for the said Commissioners, by such Rules, Orders, or Regulations as they may think fit, to declare to what Extent and for what Period the Relief to be given to able-bodied Persons or to their Families in any particular Parish or Union may be administered out of the Workhouse of such Parish or Union.⁴⁹

However, the authors of the Poor Law Amendment Act did not visualize the need for public services for those considered beggars, tramps, wayfarers and what Victorians referred to as “casuals” or “vagabonds.”⁵⁰ These were individuals that did not live in the parish where the workhouses were established. With so many people on the road, looking for work, shelter and food, it was inevitable that they would wind up on the doors of workhouses in towns where they did not reside. They were refused entry due to Article 52.

Dr. Bruce Rosen explains what happened next. “By 1837, however, it was apparent that something needed to be done to provide assistance, particularly for those indigent wayfarers from other parishes. The Poor Law Commissioners recommended that this should be provided as short term shelter (usually for a single night) and a meal in return for work.”⁵¹ Those applying for short-term relief would stay in the workhouse in “casual wards’ connected to the workhouse. As they fell under the purview and were part of the workhouse system, people who patronized casual wards should have been eligible to receive the same care and conditions as those individuals residing in the workhouse. However, conditions were sometimes worse.⁵²

II. WORKHOUSES CONDITIONS

“Wee haue erected wthn our borough a workehouse to sett poore people to worke.”

– *The Mayor of Abingdon, 1631*⁵³

Workhouses After 1834

The aim of the British workhouse system instituted in 1834 was to reduce government expenditure on poverty by establishing a severely deterrent regime. Eminent historian Dr. Ruth Richardson, a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and an affiliated scholar at Cambridge University explains:

The only option for the destitute poor would be work in exchange for a thin subsistence, and only inside the workhouse...the system was austere and harsh, treating those seeking help—even if sick or old—as if their misfortune were morally reprehensible.⁵⁴

Workhouses were administered locally even though the Poor Law Commission controlled them. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 established rules concerning behavior, nutrition, work and other aspects of the workhouses; however, in 1834 there was not one set code book or manual detailing how the regulations were to be dispensed. Therefore, depending upon the charitable inclinations of local matrons or masters, their interpretation and enforcement could be allotted in a kindly manner or brutally enforced with severe repercussions.

Mission Statement of the Workhouse

In 1836, The Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners gave a summary of what could be interpreted as the “Mission Statement” for their organization:

The necessary effect of our rules and regulations is, **to supply the inmates of a workhouse with wholesome food and sufficient clothing, a better bed than they are used to lie upon, a cleaner and a better ventilated room than they are used to inhabit, an immediate supply of medical attendance in case of illness, and to establish a degree of order and cleanliness unknown in a labourer’s cottage.**⁵⁵

[Emphasis added by author].

An investigation into each of the six objectives stated above shows that this stated mission of the workhouse was unsuccessful.

Clause #1. "to supply the inmates of a workhouse with wholesome food"

Gruel, the mainstay of the workhouse diet, was a form of hot porridge made with oats or barley boiled in water. Often made with water taken directly from either the Thames River or a local stream, the fecal matter in the water made the gruel taste terrible as well as rendered it unhealthy.⁵⁶ Well-meaning journalists sometimes disguised themselves as paupers in order to gain entry into the workhouses and casual wards and write about the conditions they found. Mary Higgs, was one such journalist and social reformer. She reported on what she discovered when she went undercover in 1905 at an anonymous casual ward of a workhouse.

We were thirsty and hungry — but alas! When we tasted our gruel, our only drink, it was sweetened to nauseousness [sic] with treacle... Anyone with a grain of common sense can realise [sic] the effect on the system of taking this sort of stuff immediately after a warm bath, following a wetting...next morning, while working, I was again and again in a profuse perspiration, and this produced a feeling of weakness, and culminated in a sharp attack of diarrhea [sic].⁵⁷

At another workhouse, Huddersfield, it was noted that the diet of the establishment, "has been and still is, insufficient, that four shillings worth of shin of beef, or leg offal, with forty-two pounds of potatoes, have been made to serve for 'soup' for 150 inmates."⁵⁸

Starvation was a constant concern. In 1845, the Master of the Andover workhouse, Colin McDougal, administered Andover like a harsh penal colony.⁵⁹ Conditions became so desperate that many male inmates deliberately committed crimes in order to be thrown into prison, where the food and working conditions were far better. Hugh Mundy, a workhouse guardian, witnessed male inmates fighting over bones that the inmates were supposed to crush into fertilizer for local farms. The men were so desperate for food that they picked the rotting marrow and gristle from the bones. Mundy raised the issue at a board meeting, but the only response was to suspend bone

crushing. Mundy then took his concerns to Thomas Wakely, his local Member of Parliament. On August 1, 1845, Wakely told Parliament about the conditions at Andover. An Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, Henry Parker, went down to Andover the following day. Parker agreed that the inmates had been starved. At the inquiry, a 61-year-old Samuel Green described what happened when fresh bones arrived at the Andover Workhouse:

We used to tell the fresh bones by the look of them and then we used to be like a parcel of dogs after them; some were not so particular about the bones being fresh as others... I eat it when it was stale and stinking because I was hungered, I suppose. You see we only had bread and gruel for breakfast, and as there was no bread allowed on meat days for dinner... .I have seen a man named Reeves eat horse-flesh off the bones.⁶⁰

When one year had elapsed, a Committee of Parliament said that insufficient rations due to “an administrative error” had occurred. They conceded that inmates had been placed on a starvation diet while requiring them to use 28-pound “rammers” to smash bones in a large bone-tub. As the result of an enormous, two-volume report published by the Select Committee, the McDougals’ were found to be unfit to hold their posts as Master and Matron of the Workhouse.⁶¹

It was inevitable that embezzlement occurred as, in order to save money, the Poor Law Commissioners paid the staff abominably low salaries.⁶² Comparing salaries, the Governor of a Victorian prison received 600 pounds per annum while a workhouse master running a similarly sized organization received on average only 80 pounds per annum. Inevitably, workhouse service often attracted ill-qualified, harsh, and incompetent directors. With many soldiers jobless, workhouse masterships often enticed roving ex-army officers with little experience of running large institutions.⁶³

Andover was not an isolated incident of misappropriation that led to hunger for the patrons of the workhouse. Doctoral student Laura Foster writes, “In reality, an overwhelming number of accusations, ranging from embezzlement to manslaughter, were brought against

workhouse masters.”⁶⁴ Worse, workhouse guardians were also guilty of misusing funds meant for pauper maintenance. Historian J.A. Erridge who wrote about the town of Brighthelmston and its workhouse claimed that while poor paupers starved and struggled to do hard physical work for a bit of token relief payment from the parish while the callous workhouse guardians indulged at the pauper’s expense:

There have been occasions when the Guardians, in the plenitude of their duties towards the poor, and also to the ratepayers, have made their Board meetings the opportunity for feasting and guzzling. The most memorable time was in the summer of 1837, when they pampered their appetites with john-dorees [whitefish], salmon, lobsters, Norfolk squab pie, poultry, and joints in profusion; red and white wines by the dozen, and spirits by the gallon; cigars by the box, and snuff by the pound; with a handsome snuff-box, too; and, the usual services of the House being too mean for them, sets of dish-covers were ordered, and dishes, dinner and pie plates, jugs, sauce tureens, cut decanters and stands, rummers [large drinking glasses], knives and forks, waiters, and a teaboard.⁶⁵

Two years after the passage of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, The Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commission published a typical workhouse diet detailing the type of food received by the inmates of six different workhouses.⁶⁶ It concluded that a typical Monday menu included: Breakfast: 7 oz. bread [525 calories] and 1 ½ pints gruel [474 calories], Dinner: 1 ½ pints soup [usually beef broth - 93 calories], 7 oz. vegetables [usually peas -190 Calories] and Supper: ¾ lb. potatoes [260 calories] for a total of 1542 calories.⁶⁷ An average man needs 2500 calories to maintain his weight.⁶⁸ Therefore, the average adult male who did light work would have lost some weight on a workhouse diet. A 20-60 year old man who was already malnourished could look forward to losing more weight if he was required to smash rocks as his work. The total calories needed to work smashing rocks for 8 hours a day is 500 calories per hour x 8 hours = 4000 calories burned. If the man eats 1542 calories, he is burning an extra 2458 calories per day. If he worked 6 days a week, he would burn an extra 14,748 calories in that time. It takes 3500 calories to equal one pound. At this rate, he could potentially lose at least 4

pounds per week, or 16 pounds a month. It is no wonder that many people succumbed to illness and death.

Clause #2. "and sufficient clothing"

In Victorian parlance, "stoving" was the process whereby clothes, and sometimes people, were cleaned to rid them of personal vermin by submitting them to sulfur fumes.⁶⁹

Following is a quote by social reformer Mary Higgs, who went undercover in the workhouse and experienced first hand the insufficient clean clothing available:

Our clothes were taken from us, and we were given blue nightgowns. These looked fairly clean, but had been worn before. They were dirty round the neck, and stained in places; we hoped they had been stoved! The old woman dressed in one without bathing. We found in the morning that both blankets and nightgowns were folded up and put away on shelves, just as we found them, apparently, and left for newcomers. We were told that the blankets were "often stoved," but I have since ascertained that they are not stoved at all workhouses every day.⁷⁰

In 1848 the Overseers of the Huddersfield Workhouse prepared a report detailing the living conditions in their institution. They noted that "the clothing of the establishment is miserably deficient" and there was no clothing in stock. People had little more than rags to cover themselves, as they were obliged to wear their own clothes. The report stated, "Instances have been known where the nakedness of even females has not been covered."⁷¹

Political activist Emmeline Pankhurst described her experiences as a Poor Law Guardian in her autobiography *My Own Story*.⁷² She writes about little girls who were:

...clad, summer and winter, in thin cotton frocks, low in the neck and short sleeved. At night they wore nothing at all, night dresses being considered too good for paupers. The fact that bronchitis was epidemic among them most of the time had not suggested to the guardians any change in the fashion of their clothes.

As Clause #2 of the mission statement of the workhouse required sufficient clothing to be provided for patrons, its purpose was not met.

Clause #3. "A better bed then they are used to lie upon..."

Beds in workhouses were often uncomfortable and crowded, with many people sharing a bed. The afore-mentioned Huddersfield Inquiry also referenced that the workhouse "is, and has been for a considerable period...crowded with inmates."⁷³ Additionally:

There were 40 children occupying one room, eight yards by five, that these children sleep four, five, six, seven, and even ten, in one bed, that 30 females live in another room of similar size, and that 50 adult males have to cram into a room seven and a half yards long by six yards wide.⁷⁴

This was of course a recipe for infection and disease. The Huddersfield Inquiry also noted:

There are at present but 65 blankets fit for use in the establishment, to fit up 79 beds, that there are but 108 sheets for these 79 beds, being 50 short of a pair each, and that there is in consequence no change of bed linen whatever.⁷⁵

The report specified that when the beds were stripped, the linen was hurried through the washtub, dried, and on the beds again for the same night. It can be imagined that in times of bad weather, when they could not be put into the sun, the linens were not always dry when put back on the beds. The report concluded, "that there are throughout the entire establishment the most unmistakable signs of bad arrangement, shortsightedness ...want of comfort, cleanliness, health, and satisfaction amongst the poor."⁷⁶

The mission statement required a better bed then the patron was used to lying upon. Damp, crowded beds are not healthy. Therefore Clause three of the mission statement for the workhouse was not satisfied.

Clause #4. "A cleaner and a better ventilated room than they are used to inhabit..."

The *Times*, on Sept 29, 1846, published two letters written by inmates of the St Pancras Workhouse. The first, from a Mr. John Witt, wished to invite the local coroner (who visited the dead-house on many occasions) to step down into the feather rooms, which he described as diabolical sewers:

About 80 men altogether, pick feathers in the two rooms...Tis a nasty, stinking, underground, wet sort of place, only fit to give cramp and rheumatism... in winter [men] are perished with cold, and are glad of a place which is made warm by so many people, though it is altogether a very unhealthy place...the feathers play the deuce with me.⁷⁷

In a second letter, John Buckenham discussed how he was thrust into the oakum room, amid the dust, under lock and key day and night with up to 40 other people, despite the risk of fire, even though the assistant medical man had stated in his opinion that “confinement in the oakum room was highly injurious.”⁷⁸ The oakum room was a place where people sat for hours, usually on hard benches, pulling apart ropes into small fibers to be used as caulking in sailing ships.

The stench of death often wafted through the workhouse corridors. In September, 1883, *The Times* carried a report on the Clerkenwell workhouse mortuary.⁷⁹ It was claimed that, for the sake of economy, bodies were kept in storage until a batch of sufficient size was reached, resulting in offensive smells.

In the Marland Union Workhouse, the smells could be especially distressing. All inmates urinated into a tub in the corner of each ward, which was left until full and then gathered and sold by the guardians for scouring cotton.⁸⁰ The inmates had few resources to bathe and smelled like sulfur, brimstone and cod-liver oil from treatments for lice. As diarrhea was endemic, that contributed to the odor.

In 1866, the Poor Law Board carried out surveys of all metropolitan workhouses and wrote a report about the conditions it found.⁸¹ The report found that the Hackney Workhouse had a system of ventilation but that it had been boarded up, and in one or two places the only breathable air came from wood being cut out of the top of the doors for ventilation. The Report also stated that the workhouse was very ill ventilated:

When we entered a room in which the windows were not open, the air was close...none of the ventilators open immediately into the outer air, the corridors and staircases are too much enclosed, and are not the great ventilators of the wards, as they should be.⁸²

This was not a clean and well-ventilated room. Even a tenement room with an open window might have been healthier than this environment. Therefore, Clause 4 of the Mission Statement was not fulfilled.

Clause #5. "an immediate supply of medical attendance in case of illness..."

In June 1847 Thomas Tatham, medical officer for the Northern district of Huddersfield, sent a letter to the Chairman of the Board of Guardians of Huddersfield workhouse.⁸³

Dr. Tatham had already complained about the workhouse a number of times, but this particular missive encapsulated his frustration and anger. He began by stating that he liked to avoid complaints, but that the affairs of the workhouse were being carried on "in such a slovenly and inefficient manner, from incapacity and negligence of the nurses appointed to take care of the sick" that he felt compelled to give a statement of the facts. He complained that he had only one nurse who could read or write, Robert Worth, who confined himself to his bed since he was disgusted by the patients who had fevers. This man with the help of another man, were the only individuals he had seen attending to the sick of both male and female patients. And he had never seen a woman assist in the female wards, especially grievous when needed to help with calls of nature. "Besides I have seen three individuals lying in their own filth with the hands and faces smeared with it two days without being washed."⁸⁴ These three individuals died within a few days of each other in June. He discusses the rampant neglect caused by the practice of employing unpaid and inexperienced resident men and women as nurses to attend to patients. These individuals were referred to as pauper nurses, and they had no medical experience:

The regular administration of Medicine prescribed and attention to those Patients who are too weak to feed or help themselves are very much neglected. I will here

remark that, when a patient arrives at a certain state of weakness and debility, as much depends upon good nursing as Medicine. It therefore becomes extremely painful as Medical Officer to find my efforts frustrated by the omission of other adjustments I have so much experience in the early and present period of my Professional career as Medical Officer to Parish Hospitals as to be fully convinced of the utter worthlessness of Pauper Nurses unless superintended by a properly paid nurse.⁸⁵

In Marland Union Workhouse, records were ill-kept and some books were missing.

Peter Higginbotham writes:

Medicines were administered by paupers who could not read and kept in unlabeled bottles, together with blacking and firewood, in a box. Although pauper nurses had to be able to read, the Guardians claimed that the medical officer never wrote prescriptions because the only medicine in the unlabeled bottles was cod-liver oil, as the illiterate nurses well knew.⁸⁶

Medical care varied amongst institutions, but did not often live up to the mission statement to have an immediate supply of medical care available in case of illness. In *The Treatment of Sick Children in the Workhouse By The Leicester Poor Law Union, 1867-1914*, Scholar Angela Negrine wrote that inspectors at the Leicester Poor Law Union noted the school matron attributed the high number of admissions to sick wards due to diseases suffered by the children brought on by the coldness of their wards.⁸⁷ Dr. Clarke, the medical officer in charge, confirmed this and stated that the small fire-grates were totally inadequate for heating such large rooms.⁸⁸ The children endured other discomforts to which Dr. Clarke graphically drew the guardians' attention when he described conditions in the boys filthy small urinal and water closet:

...the floor gets covered with urine and a number of boys raised the closet seats to urinate but with the result of soaking the floor with liquid which dribbles through to the ground below. There is no light provided, hence in winter they can't see where they are going and many go in barefooted and many stand in pools of urine which may possibly account partly as to the many sore feet and ulcerated chilblains which lay so many up in the winter there are eighty boys to one small urinal lobby.⁸⁹

Journalist Andrew Hough recalled an incident at the Bromsgrove Workhouse in Worcestershire, when a young patient, Henry Cartwright, died in 1842.⁹⁰ Surgeon Thomas S. Fletcher was investigated for negligence after the young pauper died after being immersed in a sulphuret of potassium, in a bid to cure The Itch, or scabies. Henry had joined the workhouse three months previously with his mother, who could not afford to support the family. According to records of the incident, “The surgeon, one of the area’s most respected medical practitioners, failed to supervise a nurse, Sarah Chambers, who placed the young boy in the acid bath.”⁹¹ The acid was only to be administered in small dosages, but this had not been done. Dr. Fletcher was placed under investigation but was not fired because authorities believed his “previous unblemished professional record, and kind attention to pauper patients,” meant he should be given dispensation.⁹² The life of one pauper child was deemed not worth the loss of a perceived medical professional.

Matilda Beeton, Rotherhithe workhouse’s head nurse from 1854-1866, testified before Parliament regarding the deplorable conditions of the infirmary:

When I went there many of the sick patients were dirty, and their bodies crawling with vermin; one poor old woman, age over 80, was completely alive with them. The first morning, I attended to the dressing of her legs I found the sores full, and on closer inspection I had to do things to her body too indelicate for me to name... There was an insufficiency of everything throughout the infirmary... there were no waterproof sheets, no air cushions, no bed-rests, not one night stool, and but one bed-pan, no feet nor stomach warmers; there were no basins, patients had to wash their face and hands in their chambers; there was a bad supply of towels, the same used for wiping the patient on had to serve for a tea cloth and every clean and dirty purpose.⁹³

Beeton said of her experience of the workhouse: “On the whole, it did not seem to me that a pauper’s life was regarded in any other light than the sooner they were dead the better.”⁹⁴

Clause #6 “and to establish a degree of order and cleanliness unknown in a labourer’s cottage.”

Establishing a degree of order and cleanliness was defined to mean that the workhouse master and matron must ensure all patrons maintained the rules of the workhouse, punish those who did not follow said rules within reasonable means, prevent all accidents and impose work routines for all patrons.

Rules

To maintain order in the workhouse, the Workhouse Guardians Board created a set of rules to be followed by all workhouse officers. These rules were published in the Consolidated General Order of July 24, 1847.⁹⁵ It was incumbent upon the officers of each separate workhouse to decide how brutal, long or cruel punishments for rule infractions could be.

Workhouse rules were required to be posted in the workhouse dining hall, such as those posted at Toxteth Hall (Appendix A).⁹⁶ Some of these rules included not making any noise when silence had been ordered [even for young children], maintaining personal hygiene [even if there was no clean water or soap], doing all work required [even when too old or too feeble], striking another person [even in self defense] and willfully disobeying any lawful order of any workhouse officer. Per Article 127 and 127 of the General Order, the breaking of workhouse rules fell into two categories: Disorderly conduct and Refractory conduct. The former could be punished by withdrawal of food “luxuries” such as cheese or tea and the latter could result in a period of solitary confinement.⁹⁷ This draconian treatment was one of the top reasons people hated and feared the workhouse environment.⁹⁸

Punishment

If the purpose of the workhouse was to sustain the populace yet punish them for their poverty, then creating an orderly environment through punishment seemed an ideal solution. However workhouse masters and matrons often misinterpreted the terms of punishment with disastrous consequences. In a note written at the bottom of page 71 of the General Consolidated Order, a passage inferred that workhouse masters or matrons could decide how to punish certain infractions. Like the Poor Law itself, this injunction was designed to be ambiguous:

Acting on the spirit of all these provisions, it appears desirable to impose slight punishments within the walls of the Workhouse itself for all trifling offences, and not to harass the justices with complaints which must often relate to trifling matters, or to press for the rigorous measure of commitment to hard labour at a great expense to the county, except when absolutely necessary.⁹⁹

Article 37 of *Accounts and Papers* states, “It is lawful for the master of the workhouse, without or with the direction of the Board of Guardians, to punish any disorderly pauper by substituting, during a time not greater than 48 hours” a small amount of food.¹⁰⁰ When an elderly man, James Jarvis, died due to the Master withholding a full ration of food for ten full days instead of two, a Parliamentary investigation ensued. The Master had:

...put him on a spare diet; that is to say, he confined him to an allowance of half-a-pound of bread for breakfast, the same quantity for dinner, and the same quantity for supper; and on this diet James Jarvis was kept by the master, from Tuesday evening the 17th of March until the following Thursday the 26th of March, on which day Jarvis was committed by the justices to the house of corrections.¹⁰¹

It was concluded that the medical doctor, Samuel Wright, had deemed Jarvis fit for light duty. When Mr. Jarvis complained that the work he was ordered to do was not light duty and thereby refused to work, Mr. Derry, the Master of Barrow-Upon-Soar Union workhouse withheld food for 10 days and so weakened Mr. Jarvis that he eventually died. As the purpose of

the workhouse was to sustain the populace, the enforcement of harsh punishment was often counterproductive in achieving this objective.

Workhouse punishment books, such as the *Pauper Offence Book* from Beaminster Union Dorset, list various offences done by workhouse patrons, and their penalties.¹⁰² The extremely harsh punishment for breaking a window would be deemed egregious today:

Mary Barlett, breaking window. 21 March 1843, sent to prison for 2 months. John Staple, refusing to work, January 7, 1856, committed to prison for 28 days. Elizabeth Soaper, making use of bad language in bedroom, trying to excite other inmates to insubordination. Refusing to work. January 17, 1863, taken before the magistrate and committed to prison for 14 days hard labour.

Although the rules forbade the master to discipline without the guardians' consent, many guardians did not wish to spend time debating the details of workhouse management.¹⁰³ If the master upheld regulations and maintained finances, guardians were disinclined to interfere.

Historian M. A. Crowther notes:

Workhouse masters who were overworked, uneducated and often unsupervised, were often tempted to abuse their authority...although only 3.1 per cent of masters were actually dismissed, another 9.7 per cent left under pressure, usually after complaints serious enough to be investigated by the central authority.¹⁰⁴

Punishment was not relegated only to adults. Children were often the recipients of cruel reprimands. Within the Poor Law System, punishment was expected to fit the crime, so that the nature of an offence determined the punishment given."¹⁰⁵ Beatings were a common form of punishment, usually reserved for minor damage to workhouse property. This was the case in Droitwich workhouse in 1849, where it was reported that a thirteen-year-old boy burned the stocking he was given to wear. The report does not state if the damage was done accidentally or on purpose or how he got access to inflammatory materials. The boy was ordered to be well flogged, a punishment to be inflicted with a birch rod.¹⁰⁶

Young children, who had been traumatized by separation from their parents, were especially vulnerable. Melanie Reynolds describes a pauper nurse named Catherine Levers who in 1865 kicked youngsters and beat them with a brush in the Tadcaster, North Yorkshire workhouse.¹⁰⁷ Reynolds writes:

Levers had a cruel streak, which went beyond the abuse of infants, and was fond of telling the older children to stick their tongues out before smashing their jaws together, causing them to bite and lacerate their tongues.¹⁰⁸

When an innkeeper, Mr. Joseph Sykes, visited the workhouse one time, Levers told him, “One of the children had dirtied its bed but that she had cured it. When asked how, she said, ‘I took a spoon up and put some of its own dirt [excrement] in its mouth’.”¹⁰⁹

Children were among the primary targets for cruel workhouse personnel. Debra Kelly writes that on May 31, 1894, 54 year old Ella Gillespie, a former nurse and overseer at Hackney Union’s Brentwood schools, stood trial on charges of neglect and abuse of the children in her care. For approximately eight years, Gillespie was in charge of about 500 children.¹¹⁰ As those children came forward to testify against her, the entire country was horrified by the scandal. Punishments and abuses were severe, bordering on bizarre. A common punishment was the basket drill, where children in nightclothes paraded around their rooms for hours while balancing their daytime clothes in baskets on their heads. Some children testified that they were beaten with stinging nettles and had water withheld, forcing them to drink from puddles or toilets inside.¹¹¹ Gillespie was found guilty, receiving five years’ penal servitude as her punishment.

A form of punishment used in the workhouse was an implement called a “scold’s bridle.”¹¹² In British parlance, a “scold” referred to a woman who nagged or grumbled. A form of reprimand and torture, the scold’s bridle included a headstall that held a bit with spikes, which was put in the mouth on the top of the tongue, so the pain made it impossible to talk. If the

woman was shaken about the head, it could cause broken teeth and jaw, blood and vomit. It was meant to humiliate any woman whom the administration found guilty of having a loud voice or bad behavior. An excerpt from a workhouse near Forden, Wales records the usage of a bridle: “Punishments – Ordered that Mary Davies wife of Robert Davies for riotous and other ill behavior be confined with a Bridle for two hours.”¹¹³ Such punishment that does not provide humane treatment, and harms or kills patrons, would not be conducive to achieving the mission statement.

Accidents

Negligent accidents resulting in death did not fulfill the mission statement of the guardians to provide for the safety of their occupants in an orderly environment. In 1868, at Wigan Workhouse, an inquest began into the death of Ruth Bannister, an illegitimate child, aged nine months, who had been scalded to death in a bucket of hot water.¹¹⁴ It was reported that:

The body was said to present a shocking appearance, the lower extremities having been dreadfully burned.... Its feet and legs were so badly scalded that the skin was peeling off and blood was coming from the wounds. Although previously being a healthy child, it had died the same evening.¹¹⁵

The child had been placed in the infant ward in the care of two paupers [most likely untrained nurses], assisted by a girl of seventeen named Catherine Dawber, who was described as an imbecile (i.e., mentally challenged). On the morning of the incident, Dawber brought the child to a nurse named Margaret Gaskell, saying it was dirty, and Gaskell told her to remove her diaper. The child was then placed in eight or nine quarts of scalding water. This happened next:

Mary Finch, another inmate, said she saw Dawber place the child in the water, and it gave a piercing cry. She then took it out and began to wipe it with a coarse towel. Finch saw she was doing this roughly and took the towel, in which she found a piece of skin 3in long. The inquest jury decided the child had died from being negligently and carelessly scalded whilst being nursed by Dawber, a verdict the coroner considered amounted to one of manslaughter. At her subsequent trial, however, Dawber was found not guilty of the charge.¹¹⁶

The reason for the not guilty verdict is unknown.

Accidents occurred in the infirmaries as well. In April 1882, in Holbeach Workhouse, the master, Walter Brydges Waterer, was accused of the manslaughter of a workhouse inmate, 22-year-old Thomas Bingham.¹¹⁷ Bingham had been put in a sulfur-burning cabinet by Waterer, which was being used as a treatment for scabies (Figure 2). The box had a moveable lid, in which the patient could stand with his head out of the top. Sulfur was placed on an iron tray at the bottom of the box, beneath a grating, and was ignited by a piece of hot iron. Workhouse expert Peter Higginbotham explains,

Bingham was then placed naked in the box with his neck through the lid, while the master attended to a matter elsewhere. Bingham's cries at length attracted attention and he was released, but not until he had been so terribly burned that skin and flesh fell from different parts of his body. He died a few hours afterwards.¹¹⁸

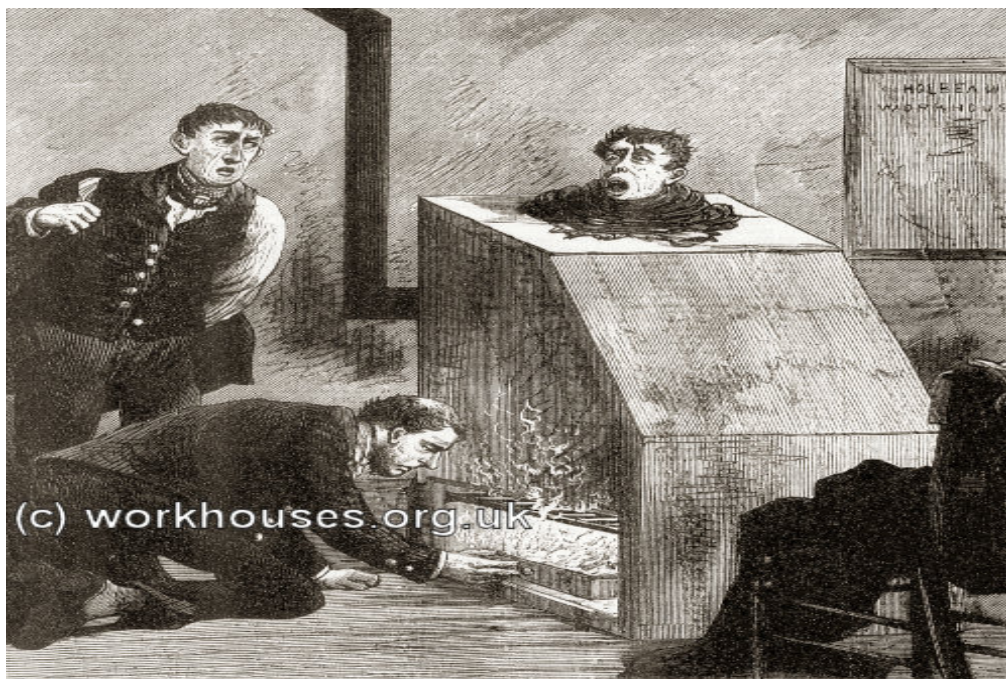


Fig. 2. A Holbeach workhouse inmate named Bingham enclosed in a sulphur fumigation box to treat his skin disease but which led to his death. Higginbotham, Peter. A Grim Almanac of The Workhouse. Kindle Edition. Page 70.

It is not surprising that substandard medical care occurred. Workhouse chaplains and doctors were paid less than half of what they could expect anywhere else, and medical officers had to pay for the drugs they prescribed to patients.¹¹⁹ Parliamentary records from July 14, 1869, show a conversation between a Dr. Brewer and a Mr. Goshen, the President of the Poor Law Board, over the question of misappropriation of workhouse funds by the former master of the St. Pancras workhouse:

MR. GOSCHEN: Sir, I have heard officially that the master of St. Pancras Workhouse has been suspended from his office for one month. He made himself a party to certain allegations to the effect that some of the patients were improperly discharged from the infirmary before they were cured. He also frustrated the efforts of the guardians by making reports for which there was no foundation, and accordingly he has been suspended without a day's notice.¹²⁰

Accidents that injure or kill residents of a workhouse do not meet the standards of the mission statement of a workhouse to ostensibly maintain the health and safety of its occupants.

Work

Workhouse guardians felt their mission to maintain an orderly environment could be achieved through tedious, often menial, work such as picking oakum. “The devil makes work for idle hands to do.” This phrase sums up how the guardians felt about the unemployed. The first version of this phrase appears in English, albeit Middle English, in Chaucer’s *Melibeus*, circa 1405, “Dooth somme goode dedes, that the deuel, which is oure enemy, ne fynde yow nat vnocupied.” This translates to, “Do some good deeds, so that the Devil, which is our enemy, won’t find you unoccupied.”¹²¹ It could be debated though that picking oakum was indeed the devil’s work, as it caused so much misery to those unfortunate souls who were forced to do it.

Britain was a seafaring nation with a navy filled with wooden ships. In a wooden boat, all seal joints or cracks in the wood were caulked with oakum. Oakum is loose fiber that is obtained

by untwisting old rope. Inmates in prisons and men and women in workhouses were often put to work picking oakum.¹²² At the Braintree Workhouse, each person had to pick half a pound of oakum in return for receiving half a pound of bread in the morning. No bread was given if the person refused to do the work.¹²³ Sometimes, a person would work eight to twelve hours a day just to earn enough to receive dinner in the workhouse. The process of picking oakum was wearisome. First, the rope was smashed with mallets to break it up into smaller pieces. These smaller pieces were then either put on hooks, which were held in place between the picker's knees, or just held in their hands. The idea was to break apart the series of strands that made up the rope so the individual fibers could be harvested. As there were no other tools available, patrons used their broken fingernails to pick it down to the individual fibers. It would be hard enough using fresh rope, but these ropes had been used at sea, and were therefore compacted, frayed, dirty, and covered in rust, salt, grease and tar. Getting them apart caused the finger pads to bleed ceaselessly and untreated cuts became infected from the dirt (e.g. Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Photographer unknown. *Women Picking Oakum In The Workhouse*. British Library. <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/women-picking-oakum-in-the-workhouse>.

The salt hurt terribly; tendonitis and bursitis became part of the everyday life of the oakum picker. A letter written by a workhouse patron relates her experience picking oakum:

Three of us were set to pick oakum. So we three sat on a wood bench in a cold room, and three pounds of oakum each was solemnly weighed out to us... After two hours I perhaps had done a quarter of a pound, and my fingers were getting sore, while the pile before me seemed to diminish little.¹²⁴

Picking oakum may have achieved the guardian's mission to establish a degree of order in the workhouse, but the price paid was terrible. Picking oakum today would be considered a repetitive stress injury that would be unlawful and would require physical therapy to correct. Eventually, the introduction of iron ships meant the demand for oakum declined.

Just as oakum picking was a form of menial work meant more to punish than to serve a useful purpose, stonecutting was a task with little reward given to male inmates that was both physically demanding and dangerous. Physical labor was hard and never meant for the old and feeble. But many men including the teenagers and the elderly were required to break stones in order to be fed or get a roof over their head. For some, it was just too much to expect, and they therefore either shunned the workhouse or received a punishment, such as reduced rations, for not doing all the work expected. Men would not be fed or housed if they did not break stones.¹²⁵

Smashing rock with a large hammer could cause chips to break off and imbed in the skin or worse, the eyes. The sound from the clashing metal mallet was earsplitting as it reverberated in the work yard. Broken pieces of rock could then be sold for road mending. For vagrants hoping for a night's lodging and a meal, workhouse tramp wards offered special cells where the men were detained until they had broken the required weight of stone into pieces small enough to fall through a grid to the outside.¹²⁶

In his book, *Grim Almanac of the Workhouse*, Higginbotham shares the conditions of some stonecutters' quarters.

20 FEBRUARY 1857 London's Lord Mayor and other City officers this evening paid a surprise visit to the West London Union casual ward at King's Cross. They discovered that the premises consisted of a large stable, containing fourteen horse-stalls, with a few men being huddled together round a fire. The place was completely devoid of any straw or bedding. The inmates stated that, on admission, they received a small portion of bread, but in the morning were turned out without anything to eat, unless they first broke a certain quantity of stone.¹²⁷

Author Liza Picard describes St. Mary's workhouse in Islington putting its able-bodied male paupers to work in an open shed with no protection from summer heat or winter frost... "hammering lumps of granite into setts [sic] for road-making... paupers weakened by starvation, and convicts in for only a short stretch, who had perhaps never used their hands except for holding a pen, never attained this expertise and hammered away helplessly."¹²⁸

Many men were not used to this type of labor. In this excerpt from one of his papers, James Greenwood, wrote how fellows in the Paddington Workhouse in 1869, would often make a mess of it

He takes hammer in hand, and sets a lump of granite before him with the idea of smashing it into fragments; but this requires "knack," that is to be acquired only by experience. The blows he deals the stone will not crack it, and all that he succeeds in doing for the first hour or two is to chip away the corners of one lump after another, accumulating perhaps a hatful of chips and dust.¹²⁹

Children were put to work as well. Emmeline Pankhurst wrote about her visit to a Manchester workhouse. "The first time I went into the place I was horrified to see little girls seven and eight years on their knees scrubbing the cold stones of the long corridors."¹³⁰ Work that creates permanent negative medical conditions such as asthma, tendonitis and bleeding finger pads does not meet the workhouse mission statement purpose to maintain a healthy populace.

WORKHOUSE MEMORIALIZED IN ART

Illustrations



Fig. 4. Interior of an English Workhouse under the New Poor Law Act. Charles Jameson Grant. British Museum. www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1614423&partId=1.

Politicians and scholars were not the only ones noticing the suffering that occurred due to the workhouses. Journalist Philip Kennedy writes, “It is hard to escape the legacy of *Punch Magazine*. From 1841 to 2002, the magazine cast a satirical eye on life in Britain. It charted the interests, concerns and frustrations of the country and today it stands as an invaluable resource for social historians.”¹³¹ The workhouse did not escape its scrutiny. Though the early issues of *Punch* were more about politics than social concerns, the illustrations were meant to be provocative and engage the reader emotionally.

One such illustration, entitled *Interior of an English workhouse under the New Poor Law Act*, shows six vignettes with accompanying captions (Figure 4). The illustrator criticizes the workhouse for its inhumane treatment of its inhabitants, as the captions are both humorous and horrifying.¹³²

In the illustration, a workhouse manager refers to a group of starving poor who beg to be let in as “varmits” and turns them away. He enjoins them to go rob for a living. Cruel overseers glare at emaciated paupers, while adults beat hemp and crying children with shaved heads pick oakum in the foreground. Others in the background are manacled to the wall or hanging from the ceiling, tied up by their feet and hands for some infraction of nonsensical rules. Ludicrous punishments are threatened for disorderly paupers who will be knocked on the head and their bodies sold to the surgeons. A manager with a whip seizes an elderly man and beats him for not working hard enough. As he begs for mercy, the manager replies that he is a lazy, old thief, and sardonically refers to Patrick Colquhoun’s statement that poverty is “therefore a most necessary and indispensable ingredient in society.” He asks him, “What was the poor made for but to work? Go to the hemp you old rascal.”¹³³

Political cartoons like this captured the public's attention and gave credence to the idea that workhouses were not properly sustaining the populace. At the very least, the last one of these vignettes, which shows a man pulling a cart illustrates that the mission of the workhouse to provide adequate medical care was not accomplished. The caption reads, "What have you got in the truck, Joe? The infant poor wot's *died*, I'm going to take one to the hospital to see for the surgeons, Ve [sic] generally have such a load as this here once a veek [sic]." ¹³⁴ For a complete transcript of each vignette, please see Appendix B.

Sketches



Fig 5. *Houseless and Hungry*. Sir Luke Fildes. 1869. Scanned image and text by Philip V. Allingham. *The Graphic*. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/fildes/1.html>.

In 1869, Luke Fildes joined the staff of *The Graphic*, a newspaper run by William Luson Thomas. Thomas was fully committed to social reform and he hoped that the visual images presented in his newspaper would have a political impact on the reading public.¹³⁵ His biographer, Mark Bills argued that the format of the paper “offered artists an unprecedented opportunity to explore social subjects, and its images of poverty made it a catalyst for the development of social realism in British art. Many of the wood-engravings which it featured were developed into major paintings”¹³⁶

In the first edition of *The Graphic* newspaper published in December 1869, artist Luke Fildes provided an illustration to accompany an article on the Houseless Poor Act. This was a

new measure that allowed unemployed people one-night of shelter in the casual ward of a workhouse. The picture produced by Fildes showed a line of exhausted and cold men, women, and children waiting in line of hopes of receiving a ticket to enter the workhouse. He entitled it, *Houseless and Hungry* (Figure 5). Fildes later recalled that the work was based on first-hand experience: “Some few years before, when I first came to London, I was very fond of wandering about, and never shall I forget seeing somewhere near the Portland Road, one snowy winter's night the applicants for admission to a casual ward.”¹³⁷

The sketch was later used as a basis for a painting by Fildes entitled *Applicants for Admission To A Casual Ward*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874. Accompanying it in the catalogue was a description by Charles Dickens of a scene outside the Whitechapel Workhouse in 1855: “Dumb, wet, silent horrors! Sphinxes set up against that dead wall, and none likely to be at the pains of solving them until the general overthrow.”¹³⁸ This collaboration between Dickens and Fildes, two prominent artists and social reformers of the nineteenth century, adds extra significance to the subject of the painting – the suffering populace. If this was the condition of the people entering the workhouse, it is not hard to imagine how limited calories and harsh work impacted upon them once they entered. The guardian’s mission to support the populace should have started with allowing them entrance more quickly, and not allowing them to suffer in the elements.

Novels



Fig 6. *Oliver Twist Asking for More Food*. Mahoney, J. Bettmann Archive / Getty Images. <https://www.thoughtco.com/oliver-twist-review-740959>.

Through his novels and other papers, author Charles Dickens eloquently described his perception of Britain as it lurched forward during the Industrial Revolution. As such, he became a renowned and respected chronicler of the Victorian experience. Many of his works detail the misery suffered by the indigent and their attempt to find a better life.

Although Dickens never actually lived in a workhouse, he did understand poverty. When he was 12 his father went to Marshalsea Debtors prison, taking Dickens' mother and his younger siblings with him.¹³⁹ Dickens was left to fend with his sister Fanny and worked at a boot blacking factory. Later, he actually lived a few doors down from the Strand Workhouse on Cleveland Street – the very same place where Dr. Rogers, alluded to in Chapter II, became overwhelmed with his duties, lack of supplies and assistance.¹⁴⁰ Dickens' recollection of bedraggled paupers waiting at the door for admittance to the Strand Workhouse, and the sounds and smells of that place, permeated his consciousness and are reflected in his narratives.¹⁴¹

In a *Walk In The Workhouse*, Charles Dickens compares the conditions faced by patrons of a workhouse to those of felons in prison, with the felons actually receiving better care:

We have come to this absurd, this dangerous, this monstrous pass, that the dishonest felon is, in respect of cleanliness, order, diet, and accommodation, better provided for, and taken care of, than the honest pauper.¹⁴²

A Christmas Carol and *Oliver Twist* are two examples of novels in which his characters live in wretched settings. *Oliver Twist* attests to the miserable treatment many suffered at the hands of uncaring and parsimonious workhouse staff, and reflect that the workhouse mission to care for the poor with wholesome food was unmet.¹⁴³ In the story, malnourished children, dressed in rags are fed watered down gruel. One of them, Oliver, is so hungry he asks for more, and he is removed from the workhouse for this temerity (Figure 6). This story of an orphaned boy living in London so moved the populace that it was one factor leading to *Dickensian* becoming the easiest word to describe an unacceptable level of squalid poverty.¹⁴⁴ In his article, “Charles Dickens, Six things he gave the modern world,” Alex Hudson writes, “In 2009, when president of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers wanted to talk about the deprivation in some areas, it was not described as terrible or horrific but as “life mirroring the times of Dickens.”¹⁴⁵

The coldly scientific and unfeeling philosophy of Thomas Malthus regarding the inevitability of suffering caused by an overpopulated Britain was reflected in the language created for Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*.¹⁴⁶ On an icy night when charitable men press him to make some “slight provision for the poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time,” Scrooge asks if there are any prisons.¹⁴⁷ One of the men tells him there are plenty of prisons.

The following interchange then occurs:

“And the Union workhouses?” demanded Scrooge. “Are they still in operation?”

“They are. Still,” returned the gentleman, “I wish I could say they were not.”

“The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?” said Scrooge.

“Both very busy, sir.”

Scrooge then states he does not make himself merry at Christmas and says:

“I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishment I have mentioned--they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there.”

“Many can't go there; and many would rather die.”

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”¹⁴⁸

More than any other writer of his time, Charles Dickens' work attests to the fact that the mission of the workhouse to provide the items delineated in its mission statement were not achieved.

CONCLUSION

The workhouse after 1834 failed to meet the mission as put forth by the Second Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners of 1836 to sustain the majority of the workhouse patrons entrusted to its care. Inmates were often not provided wholesome food or sufficient clothing. Bedding and linens were either infested with lice or non-existent, and wire pillows made sleeping difficult. The air in some workhouses was so foul it made it hard to breathe, and medical care often involved unskilled nurses that did more harm than good. Punishment for breaking the rules did not help establish a degree of order and cleanliness. Accidents and negligence resulted in death of the people the workhouse was meant to sustain.

Prior to 1834, the poorhouse was a refuge for local parishioners if they suffered an accident, needed help with rent or food, became ill or elderly with no resources, or were orphaned, widowed or mentally challenged. There was no expectation that they must work in order to receive services. It was encouraged, but not enforced. Money for food and rent was sometimes given to parishioners directly by the church so the poor could sustain themselves on their own. However, after 1834, entering the workhouse (as poorhouses became known), became the only recourse for those unable to care for themselves; no assistance was to be given outside their walls. For those individuals who used to take pride in their work, who enjoyed earning money to raise their families, the idea of “work as punishment” must have been anathema.

The root causes of poverty were not addressed in 1834 when the Act was created, and Parliament did not actively attempt to solve the issues causing destitution. Workhouses were built to sustain the poor but also to demean and shame them for asking for taxpayer assistance and to punish them for being broke. In the twentieth century, the idea of work as penalty for being insolvent became increasingly repellant and inhumane to the British population. Poverty

was no longer seen as a crime, but a condition to be remedied. Rehabilitation and independence became the goal. To that end, trades were taught, such as shoemaking, tailoring, bricklaying, painting, or plumbing for the men, sewing, cooking, and other household tasks for the women. By the 1880s, greater understanding of poverty and its complex links with economic conditions (such as low pay and unemployment) gradually began to change the sentiments of those with power in Parliament on how to care for the poor.¹⁴⁹

The workhouse as an institution closed its doors in 1948 with the passing of the National Assistance Act:

An Act to terminate the existing poor law and to provide in lieu thereof for the assistance of persons in need by the National Assistance Board and by local authorities; to make further provision for the welfare of disabled, sick, aged and other persons and for regulating homes for disabled and aged persons and charities for disabled persons; to amend the law relating to non-contributory old age pensions; to make provision as to the burial or cremation of deceased persons; and for purposes connected with the matters aforesaid.¹⁵⁰

Many of the old buildings are used as museums today, complete with samples of clothing, cutlery, bowls, bedding, workhouse implements, punishment devices, rule books, etc.

Hopefully governments have learned this lesson from workhouses: any system that destroys self-respect, callously breaks up the family unit, punishes people instead of helping them, and erodes the basic dignity of the person it is supposed to support, should never be used again. It is both unproductive and morally reprehensible.

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APPENDIX A
TOXTETH PARK RULES

TOWNSHIP OF TOXTETH PARK

Extracts from the Order of the POOR LAW BOARD.

PUNISHMENTS

FOR

MISBEHAVIOUR OF THE PAUPERS

IN THE WORKHOUSE

(c) www.workhouses.org.uk

Art. 127. Any Pauper, being an inmate of the Workhouse, who shall neglect to observe such of the regulations in this Order as are applicable to him as such inmate;—

Or who shall make any noise when silence is ordered to be kept;

Or shall use obscene or profane language;

Or shall by word or deed insult or revile any person;

Or shall threaten to strike or to assault any person;

Or shall not duly cleanse his person;

Or shall refuse or neglect to work, after having been required to do so;

Or shall pretend sickness;

Or shall play at cards or other games of chance;

Or shall refuse to go into his proper ward or yard, or shall enter or attempt to enter, without permission, the ward or yard appropriate to any class of paupers other than that to which he belongs;

Or climb over any fence or boundary wall surrounding any portion of the Workhouse premises, or shall attempt to leave the Workhouse otherwise than through the ordinary entrance;

Or shall misbehave in going to, at, or returning from Public Worship out of the Workhouse, or at Divine Service or Prayers in the Workhouse;

Or having received temporary leave of absence, and wearing the Workhouse clothes, shall return to the Workhouse, after the appointed time of absence, without reasonable cause for the delay;

Or shall wilfully disobey any lawful order of any officer of the Workhouse;

Shall be deemed **DISORDERLY**.

Art. 128. Any pauper, being an inmate of the Workhouse, who shall, within seven days, repeat any one, or commit more than one, of the offences specified in Art. 127;—

Or who shall by word or deed insult or revile the Master or Matron, or any other officer of the Workhouse, or any of the Guardians;

Or shall wilfully disobey any lawful order of the Master or Matron after such order shall have been repeated;

Or shall unlawfully strike or otherwise unlawfully assault any person;

Or shall wilfully or mischievously damage or soil any property whatsoever belonging to the Guardians;

Or shall wilfully waste or spoil any provisions, stocks, tools or materials, or work, belonging to the Guardians;

Or shall be drunk;

Or shall act or write indecently or obscenely;

Or shall wilfully disturb other persons at Public Worship out of the Workhouse, or at Divine Service or Prayer in the Workhouse;

Shall be deemed **REFRACTORY**.

Art. 129. The Master may, with or without the direction of the Guardians, punish any disorderly pauper for substituting, during at time not greater than forty-eight hours, for his dinner as prescribed by the Dietary, a meal consisting of eight ounces of bread, or one pound of cooked potatoes or boiled rice, and also by withholding from him, during the same period, all butter, cheese, tea, sugar or broth, which such pauper would otherwise receive, at any meal, during the time aforesaid.

Art. 130. The Guardians may, by a special direction to be entered on the minutes, order any refractory pauper to be punished by confinement in a separate room, with or without an alteration of diet, similar in kind and duration to that prescribed in Art. 129 for disorderly paupers; but no pauper shall be so confined for a longer period than twenty-four hours, or, if it be deemed right that such pauper should be carried before a Justice of the Peace, and if such period of twenty-four hours should be insufficient for that purpose, then for such further time as may be necessary for such purpose.

Art. 131. If any offence, whereby a pauper becomes refractory under Art. 128, be accompanied by any of the following circumstances of aggravation, (that is to say,) if such pauper

Persist in using violence against any person;

Or persist in creating a noise or disturbance, so as to annoy other inmates;

Or endeavour to excite other paupers to acts of insubordination;

Or persist in acting indecently or obscenely in the presence of any other inmate;

Or persist in mischievously breaking or damaging any goods or property of the Guardians;

the Master may, without any direction of the Guardians, immediately place such refractory pauper in confinement for any time not exceeding twelve hours; which confinement shall however, be reckoned as part of any punishment afterwards imposed by the Guardians for the same offence

JAMES MOULDING, Clerk to the Guardians

Higginbotham, Peter. "Toxteth Hall Rules." *workhouses.org.uk*. 2019.

APPENDIX B
TRANSCRIPTION OF THE PANELS OF THE POLITICAL SATIRE
CARTOON,
INTERIOR OF AN ENGLISH WORKHOUSE
UNDER THE NEW POOR LAW ACT

[To be read from top left and down:]

The Mode of Punishment for the incorrigible, by order of the Overseers.

Pray Sir, have mercy on us and let us in, or give us some relief, for we are actually starving. Then go and rob for your living for ye can't enter here – be off, ye varmint.

Beating this here hemp is worsen than breaking stones. Lord ha' mercy on us poor.

Our heads shaved and no shirt allowed us to wear; talk of Vest Ingy slavery, indeed vy they're expectable.

Oh Sir, have mercy on me, I cannot work so hard, for I'm old, ill and feeble, allow me but 10 minutes rest. Rest, indeed! You old lazy their, d'ye think ye came in here to be a gentleman. Old and young must labour here- what was the poor made for but to work? – go to the hemp you old rascal.

By order of the Commissioners of the New Poor Laws, the period for all paupers to work is from 4 in the morning to 10 at night. 3 hours allowed for clearing away & sweeping the workhouse yard.

NOTICE, For being longer than 10 minutes to each of the two meals per day, viz. breakfast and supper, 39 lashes. For going out of the workhouse yard without permission, a day without food. Being disobedient 29 lashes & 3 days confinement under ground. For being idle a month at the tread-mill.

NOTICE, Is hereby given, all able-bodied paupers who conduct themselves in a mutinous or disorderly manner will be knocked on the head without a trial and their bodies sold to the surgeons. By order of government.

What have you got in the truck, Joe? – The infant poor wot's died, I'm going to take one to the hospital to sell for the surgeons, we generally have such a load as this here once a week.

[A man carries a bucket that says "pea soup for the paupers."]

Grant, Charles Jameson. *Interior of an English Workhouse under the New Poor Law Act*. British Museum.