

Workhouse Life

What Was a Workhouse?

Workhouses were common during the Victorian era of the 1800s, but the first record of one dates back to 1652, in Exeter. A workhouse was a huge building which was built to accommodate approximately 1000 paupers, who either could not get a job or were not well enough to work.

Poor, unemployed, able-bodied people were expected to enter a workhouse, to live and work. The alternative was being homeless and living on the streets, begging for food or money, or have the constant threat of prison!

A Last Resort

The numbers of poor people soared in the 1830s, and new Union Workhouse buildings were built, the first one being in Abingdon, Oxfordshire in 1835.

Entering a workhouse was the last thing people wanted to do, and the prospect of doing so was meant to put off lazy people, who were not attempting to find work. If a man felt there was nothing else for it but to enter a workhouse, his whole family had to go with him. It was thought to be shameful if this happened because it meant the man could not support his own family.

Organisation of a workhouse

The men, women, and children were all housed separately. Children were only allowed to spend a brief amount of time a week with their parents. However, most children in a workhouse were orphans.

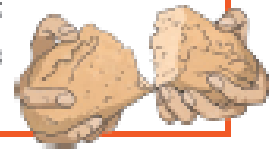
Everyone slept in large dormitories. It was common for girls to sleep four to a bed.

Children in Workhouses

Every day for three hours, children were expected to have lessons in reading, writing, arithmetic and Christian religion. In 1836, it was decided that children were taught to read but not write, as it was not considered important for poor children to be able to write.

Food

Food mainly consisted of bread, broth and cheese. Twice a week meat was included. If someone broke the rules, they would often have to go without a meal or two as punishment.



Clothing

Everyone had to wear a uniform of scratchy, dull material. It was made to be hard wearing, rather than comfortable.

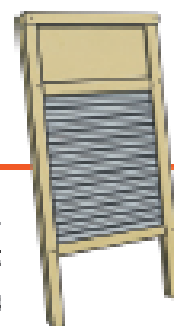
Teachers were often cruel and strict. It was against workhouse rules for children to be hit by a teacher, but many instances of cruelty were reported, such as children being caned with birch branches.

Girls had some lessons but they were generally taught needlework and other domestic skills so that they could become a maid or servant at the age of fourteen.

Jobs in the Workhouse

Work in a workhouse was meant to be hard and strenuous.

Men	stone breaking grinding corn work in the fields chopping wood
Women	laundry cleaning scrubbing walls and floors spinning weaving



Both men and women had to work doing something called oakum. This was a task where old ropes were unpicked for many hours at a time, so that the threads could be mixed with tar on board ships to waterproof sailing vessels.

Illness

There were no doctors at the workhouses and illnesses were treated by old, female inmates, who were often unable to read. Ringworm – an infectious disease of the scalp - was a common problem. Children had to have their head shaved and have iodine rubbed into their head. It was smelly and embarrassing.

Most people who entered a workhouse never left.

Workhouses were officially closed in 1930. The buildings were then used for hospitals and care homes.

Useful words

pauper: a very poor person who received public charity

orphan: a child whose parents had both died.

dormitories: large bedrooms with many beds.

arithmetic: maths and number work

inmates: the name given to people living in a workhouse.

Questions

1. During which period in British history were workhouses mainly used?

2. Explain what type of person lived in a workhouse.

3. Give an example of what might happen to a poor person who did not want to live in a workhouse.

4. Why were Union Workhouses built in the 1830s?

5. Why was it considered shameful to live in a workhouse?

6. How were people punished if they broke the rules?

7. Do you think people wanted to wear the workhouse uniforms? Explain your reasons.

8. Would it matter to an orphan to live separately from the men and women? Explain your answer.

9. Why were children not taught to write from 1836?

10. What part of the body was infected if a person had ringworm?

11. Give three reasons why you would not have wanted to live in a workhouse. Explain your answer.
