



## The Heritage Family History

### School Records Project

#### Information Sheet 5: The Poor and the Workhouse

If you have heard or read the story of Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens you will know that young Oliver Twist was sent to the workhouse to live because he was poor and had no one to look after him. He was so hungry that one dinner time he asked for more food and was cruelly punished for this. Life in the workhouse was hard, but not always as bad as Dickens suggests. This information sheet will tell you a little about workhouses and the people in them.

Throughout history there have been poor people who did not have sufficient food or clothing or money to buy food for the needs of themselves and their families. The way the government has looked after the poor has greatly changed over the years.



*Before 1834 ordinary cottages or houses would be used to house the poor*

*This is a row of cottages in Stratford upon Avon which was used for the poor. Sometimes these early workhouses were called poorhouses.*

*Image courtesy of [www.workhouse.org](http://www.workhouse.org)*

### **Who were the poor and why were they poor?**

Poor people were people who did not have sufficient food or perhaps clothes for their families. In some cases a family would become temporarily poor if the breadwinner of the family became ill and could not work. In other cases if the breadwinner died young and left a large family behind him it would be very hard for the rest of the family to earn enough money to provide enough food. The breadwinner was the person who earned the majority of a family's income and was usually the father. Some families never earned much money and only just made enough money to buy enough food to live on.

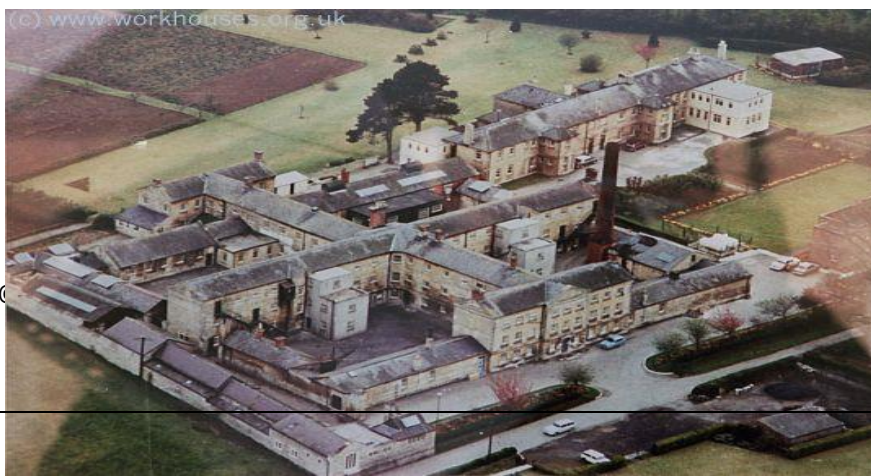
### **Who looked after the poor?**

Just three years before Queen Victoria came to the throne, in 1834, the government made an important change in the way that the poor were cared for by passing an Act of Parliament known as The Poor Law Amendment Act. This act radically altered the way the poor were treated during Victoria's reign.

Before 1834 the poor had been looked after by the other people who lived in each parish. The country was divided into parishes as long ago as the ninth century and originally each parish was attached to one church and was in the care of the vicar of that church who looked after the people there (the parishioners). Each year some of the parishioners would be appointed as parish officers and they each had individual responsibilities to help look after the parishioners and see that everything in the parish ran smoothly. The constable looked after law and order, the churchwarden looked after the church, the waywarden looked after the roads and the overseer of the poor looked after the poor and gave those who deserved it "poor relief". Poor relief was either food or clothing or money, usually handed out once a week to poor families.

This system had worked fairly well for over two hundred years but by the end of the nineteenth century there was not enough money to cope with the increasing number of people asking for poor relief. The number of people asking for help rose sharply as a result of changing farming methods

which meant fewer farm labourers were needed, long wars which drained the country of money and poor harvests.



The government decided it was time to change things so that less money was needed to look after the poor, and for England, Ireland and Wales it introduced workhouses. Workhouses were large buildings built especially to house hundreds of poor people from miles around. They usually covered a twenty mile area, known as a “union” and if you needed poor relief you had to go and live in the workhouse in order to receive help. This was a great contrast to the old system where people stayed living in their homes and were looked after locally. This is the workhouse in Melksham, Wiltshire

- **Where was the nearest workhouse or poorhouse to your school? Use an internet search engine and search on “the name of your county” AND “workhouses”. This should give you a list of workhouses. Choose the one nearest to your school and see if you can find it on an old Ordnance Survey map and then on a modern day map.**
- **Perhaps the building is still standing? If so find out what is it used for today. If the building is no longer there what is there instead?**
- **Can you find any old photographs of the workhouse?**

### **Life in the workhouse.**

Living conditions in the workhouse were made as unattractive as possible in order to stop people from asking for relief (help). The government thought that too many people were asking for poor relief and this way only those people who were desperately poor would apply for help because most people would not want to leave their homes.

In the workhouse families were split up, so husbands and wives lived in separate parts of the buildings and children over the age of 7 lived separately in a children’s wing. All inmates who were fit and healthy had to work and were given boring jobs such as unpicking old rope (oakum), or crushing stones for road repairs and they were even given bones to crush which were then used as fertilizer on the fields.

The workhouse was run by a workhouse master, usually with the help of his wife. Some masters were fair and caring and life in these workhouses was tolerable, but some were cruel and treated the inmates very badly, so that in some cases they were starving. All inmates had to put on workhouse clothes and were not allowed to leave the

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**Crushing stones**

Image courtesy of [www.workhouses.org](http://www.workhouses.org)

workhouse unless they officially discharged themselves -- which meant they would receive no more food.

In 1847, after it was discovered that people in one workhouse were gnawing on the bones they were crushing because they were so hungry, the government realized that conditions in some workhouse were far too bad and new laws were passed to make sure that conditions were better. Even so it was a hard and lonely life in the workhouse with no privacy and no access to one's family.

By the end of Victoria's' reign conditions in the workhouses were far more acceptable and in the early twentieth century life in the workhouse was much more relaxed with people being allowed to go outside the workhouse boundaries and sometimes even wear their own clothes.

Over the years many workhouses developed schools and hospitals within or outside their grounds. Many poor people would go to the workhouse hospital if they could not afford a doctor as in those days there was no National Health Service and few public hospitals. The workhouse system finally ended in 1930 and some workhouse buildings became. Other workhouses were either pulled down or the buildings were sometimes converted into accommodation, often into flats. Below is a photograph of what used to be Andover Workhouse in Hampshire, which is now converted into flats.



In Scotland which is covered by its own laws, large workhouses were not introduced. In 1845 the government encouraged parishes to get together to build poorhouses which were smaller than

workhouses and did only housed the poor who were not well enough to look after themselves. As the century passed some poorhouses did accept able bodied people and gave the work to do.

- Use the census returns to locate the workhouse and its inhabitants.
- Choose two or three different census years and compare the type and number of people living in the workhouses in each year.
- How many men, women and children and were there in each year?
- Where were they born? How far away were most people born from the workhouse they were living in? Use a map to chart the places people were born and see if the results change depending on which census you are looking at? Discuss the results.

Below is a list of the staff you might have found in a workhouse. See what you can find out about the type of job they did. Use an internet search engine and search on each position putting "workhouse" in front of the job title.

**MASTER**

**MATRON**

**SCHOOLMASTER/MISTRESS**

**CHAPLAIN**

**NURSE**

**SUPERINTENDANT OF OUTDOOR LABOUR**

**PORTER**

*Many thanks to [www.workhouses.org](http://www.workhouses.org) for the images of stone crushing, the aerial view of a work house and photo of the poor cottages.*