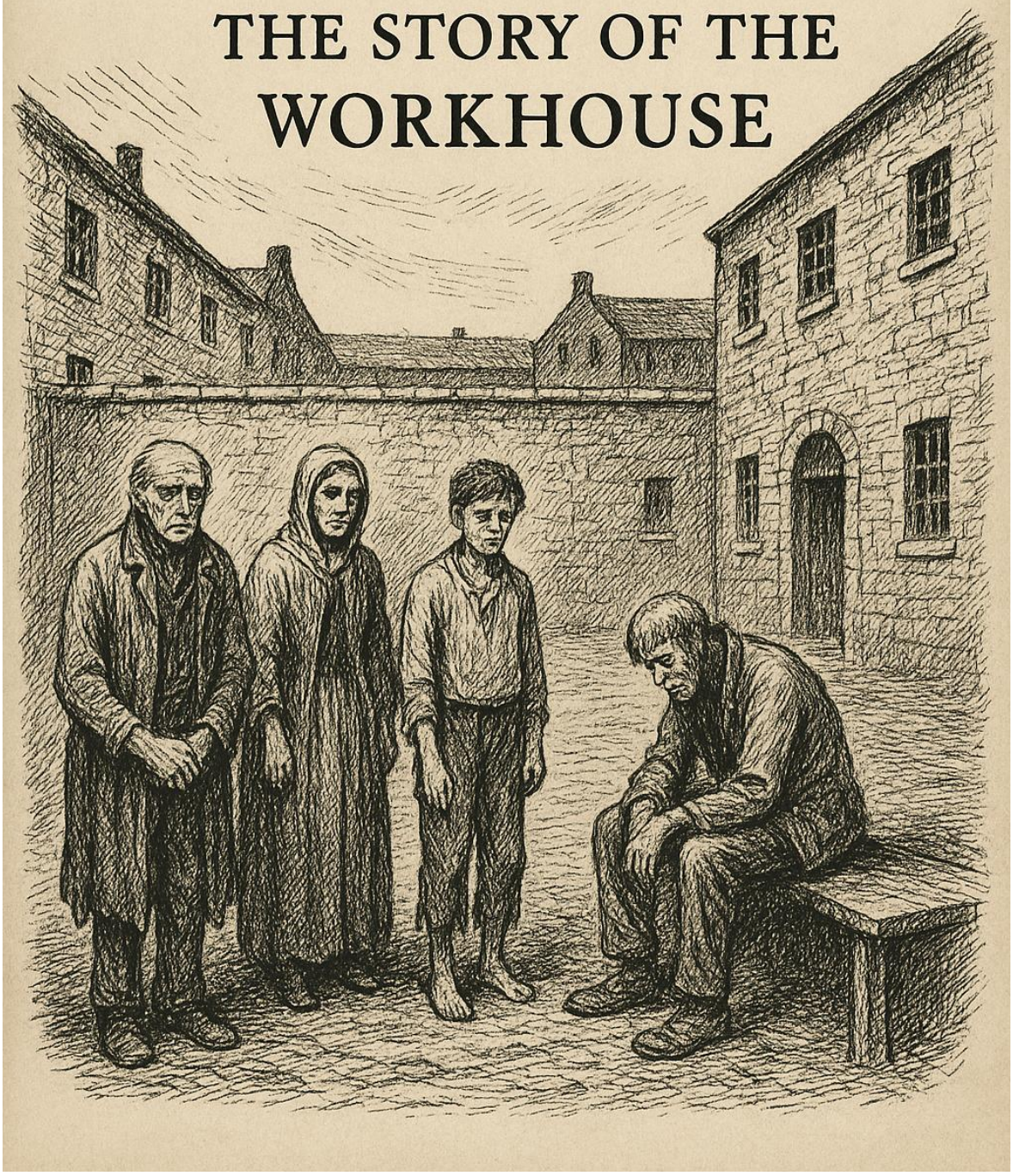
PAUPERS AND PUNISHMENT

THE STORY OF THE WORKHOUSE



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Other Titles in This Series

Gruel and Grit: Life Inside the Workhouse

What is a Workhouse and Why Were They Created?

Imagine a place where the food was bland, the chores were endless, and the heating was… non-existent… That's a workhouse!

A workhouse was an essential all-in-one solution for dealing with poverty in Britain from the 1600s right up to the early 1900s. If you were poor, homeless, unemployed, elderly, sick, or just a bit down on your luck, the government had a handy suggestion: "off you trot to the workhouse!"

But don't pack your slippers just yet – these were not cosy places. The idea was simple: if you *really* needed the help, you could have it… but you would have to *really really* want it. Life inside was deliberately tough to stop people from turning up just to get a free meal and a nap.

So, if they were so awful, then why were they created?

Well, if we go back to Tudor times, the rich were beginning to get a bit twitchy about all the poor people wandering the streets asking for help. The solution? The Poor Laws! These set up a system where parishes had a responsibility to look after their poor – but preferably in a way that discouraged laziness.

By the 1800s, things had got out of hand (not to mention expensive), so the government introduced the New Poor Law in 1834, which basically said:

"You can get help… but only in the form of hard beds, hard work, and even harder gruel"

More about that later.

So, workhouses were created to be the *least appealing* form of charity possible – help was there, but it came with a side order of cold porridge and a long day of picking apart old ropes or scrubbing laundry.

The Welfare System Before 1600. Spoiler: There Wasn't One.

If you think workhouses sound pretty terrible, imagine if you were unlucky enough to be poor *before* the 1600s, when Britain didn't have any sort of formal welfare system – at least, not in the way we think of it today. There were no benefits offices, no universal credit, and certainly no soup kitchens with Wi-Fi.

So, who helped these unfortunate folks? Well, the church for one. Monasteries often gave out food, ale, and a place to sleep for the poor and sick – think of them as medieval food banks with stained glass windows.

Some of the wealthier landowners would occasionally hand out alms (coins or bread) – partly from Christian duty, and partly because having starving peasants cluttering up your land was bad for business.

Villages and parishes might help locals if they knew them, but there was no national system as such. If you were poor, but happened to live in a kind-hearted village, you might be okay. If not… well good luck.

A bit like today, poor people were expected to find work if they could. Even back in the 1300s, the idea of helping someone who *could* work but *didn't* was very unpopular. In fact, after the Black Death in 1348, when workers were in short supply (due to half the country's population popping their clogs), the government actually made laws to stop people demanding higher wages and to force people to work. Cheerful stuff.

Then in the 1530s, Good old Henry VIII went on monastery-smashing spree (also known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries) and in doing so, accidently did away with the country's main welfare system. Suddenly, there were no more kindly monks handing out food – and a whole lot more beggars on the street.

Cue panic. By the late 1500s, the government realised that leaving the poor to wander around starving wasn't a great plan and quickly started passing laws to deal with poverty.

The Elizabethan Poor Law: Helping the Poor (Sort Of)

The Elizabethan Poor Law (officially known as the Poor Relief Act), which took effect from 1601, was essentially the start of a proper welfare system in England. The law dictated that local parishes (which were the smallest unit of local government at the time) were now responsible for their own poor. In short, they introduced a tax system whereby the wealthier residents of the parish would pay a "poor rate" and this would be used to support people who couldn't work. The money was collected by Overseers of the Poor, and they would decide who got help, basically they were your Tudor version of a benefits officer.

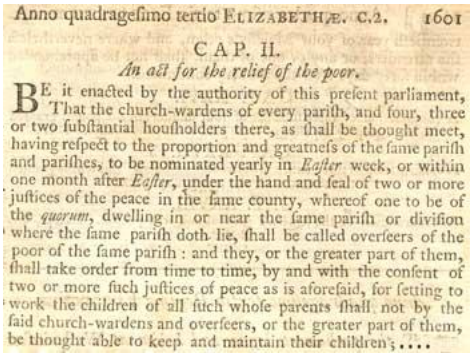
There was quite a big distinction between the types of poor;

- The "deserving poor" – the elderly, the sick, and orphans. They were given money, food, and sometimes housing. These were the people everyone agreed needed help.
- The "underserving poor" – able-bodied people who weren't working. They were expected to get a job, or be punished for idleness. If you were healthy but jobless, you may be sent to a House of Correction or made to work in exchange for aid.

A House of Correction was where you would be sent if the government thought you needed your attitude fixed. Introduced in the late 1500s, they were early versions of prisons for poor people who were seen as lazy, idle, or up to no good.

You could be sent there for begging without permission, sleeping rough, or refusing to work.

All in all, the Poor Law wasn't exactly soft and cuddly, but it was organised, and it meant for the first time: every parish had a duty to care for the poor and poverty became a local issue, not just a moral or religious one. Did it work though? Well, yes, it *kind* of did. It created a structured system that lasted for over 200 years – until of course the Poor Law Amendment Act came along and said "You know what would help the poor? Gruel and workhouses!" More about that later though.



Anno quadrageſimo tertio ELIZABETHÆ. C. 2. 1601

CAP. II.

An act for the relief of the poor.

BE it enacted by the authority of this preſent parliament, That the church-wardens of every pariſh, and four, three or two ſubſtantial houſholders there, as ſhall be thought meet, having reſpect to the proportion and greatneſs of the ſame pariſh and pariſhes, to be nominated yearly in *Eaſter* week, or within one month after *Eaſter*, under the hand and ſeal of two or more juſtices of the peace in the ſame county, whereof one to be of the *quorum*, dwelling in or near the ſame pariſh or diviſion where the ſame pariſh doth lie, ſhall be called overſeers of the poor of the ſame pariſh: and they, or the greater part of them, ſhall take order from time to time, by and with the conſent of two or more ſuch juſtices of peace as is aforeſaid, for ſetting to work the children of all ſuch whoſe parents ſhall not by the ſaid church-wardens and overſeers, or the greater part of them, be thought able to keep and maintain their children; ....

From Charity to Crisis: The Failing of the Old Poor Law

By the 1700s the Elizabethan Poor Law 1601 was still the main system in place but as the population grew and life became more complicated (thank you, Industrial Revolution-in-the-making), poor relief started to creak under the pressure.

Poor relief was mostly offered in two ways. You had your outdoor relief, which was help given to people *outside* of an institution, things like money, food, clothing, or fuel. This was cheaper, easier, and the most popular option. Then there was indoor relief, which was help given *inside* a poorhouse. These were less popular and more expensive to run, so normally reserved for the sick, elderly, or people without family support.

> Poorhouses (or early workhouses) did exist in the 1700s. They were locally run, often quite basic, and aimed to give the poor somewhere to live and work in exchange for help.
>
> They were very different from the cold, gruel-serving Victorian institutions of doom we usually picture, those came along after 1834.

The problem was, it was getting more expensive to feed and house these people and with the poor rate going up, the rich were starting to grumble.

Another issue was that, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, people were starting to move around more… but as the system relied on you *staying* in your parish, chaos quickly ensued as people tried to work out who was responsible for taking care of whom. This led to settlement laws being passed in an attempt to keep costs down; essentially if you tried to ask for help somewhere else, you would be sent packing back to your own parish.

Some parishes tried to get creative with experiments and reforms. In 1723, a new law called the Workhouse Test Act (or Knatchball's Act, named after Sir Edward Knatchball) gave parishes the power to tell people if they wanted help they *had* to come to the workhouse, the idea being that this would discourage people from seeking relief unless they were really desperate, an early form of means testing in a way.

Another, quite famous attempt was the Speenhamland System in 1795, whereby wages were *topped up* by your local parish if you were working, but not earning enough to live on – like an early form of tax credits.

It wasn't really working out though. By the end of the 1700s, lots of people, particularly the rich, were complaining that the current system encouraged laziness, was too expensive, and was resulting in people relying on the parish instead of just working harder. All this complaining eventually led to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act.

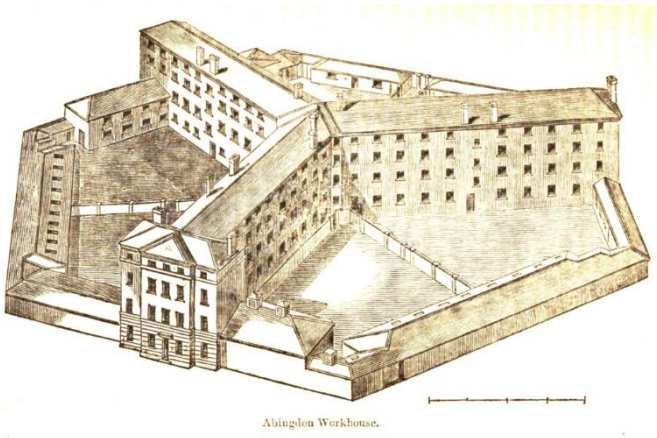
The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act: The New "Improved" Poor Law

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 was a major overhaul of the way Britain helped its poor. And by "helped," we really mean: make it deliberately unpleasant so people wouldn't ask for help unless they absolutely had to. The old, patchy, parish-based system was replaced with a new, tougher, more centralised system – one that became famous for its strict rules, grim workhouses, and a national shortage of joy.

By the early 1800s the population was booming and the cost of poor relief was rising fast. The system itself was generally quite messy and inconsistent and with the rich taxpayers moaning "we aren't running a charity you know," the government decided to tighten things up.

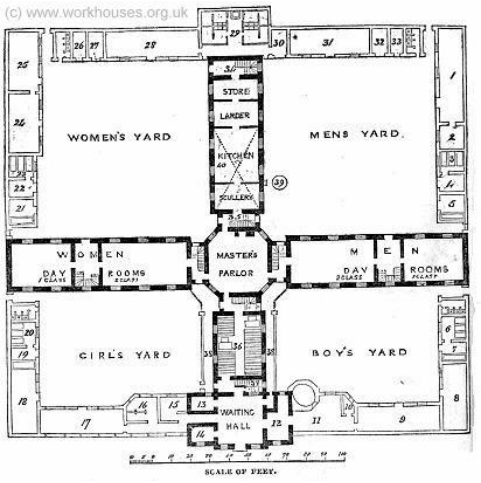
The old parish system was abolished, so instead of each parish running its own system, they were grouped into Poor Law Unions, each union having its very own central workhouse. They also set up a Poor Law Commission to supervise the whole system and outdoor relief was discouraged. If you wanted help, you entered the workhouse, where life was *deliberately tough* to deter all but the truly desperate.

The first workhouse purpose-built under this new act is generally considered to be the Union Workhouse at Abingdon, Berkshire, which opened in 1835 – just one year after the act was passed. They didn't hang about!


Abingdon Workhouse.

Between 1835 and 1840, hundreds of new workhouses were being built across England and Wales. Many were designed using standardised plans by architects like Samson Kempthorne, who created the classic "cruciform" layout – a grim cross shaped design perfect for separating people by gender, age, and usefulness.

These workhouses were larger and much more uniform compared to the patchy parish workhouses before. They were designed to enforce strict discipline, hard work, and minimal comfort. Families were separated, diet was uniform (gruel, gruel, and more gruel), and rules were rigid. No relief would be given outside of the workhouse unless it was absolutely necessary – the whole system was designed to discourage reliance on welfare.



Was it popular? Nope. The passing of the law caused much unrest. There were protests and riots, especially in the north of England with fierce opposition from working-class communities, radicals, and even some local officials.

Charles Dickens: The Workhouse's Most Famous Critic with a Quill

The author, Charles Dickens had *a lot* to say about the workhouse, and he wasn't afraid to say it loudly, bitterly, and brilliantly through his writing. He didn't just describe workhouses – he exposed their cruelty, hypocrisy, and inhumanity to the world.

Probably the most famous moment in all of Dickens' work comes from ***Oliver Twist*** (1837), where little Oliver, a workhouse-born orphan, dares to ask for a second heling of gruel. That simple request causes shock, horror, and outrage from the adults in charge with one official dramatically exclaiming "that boy will be hung."

In some of his other works; *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*, Dickens paints a grim picture of the workhouse system and some key ideas he got across were that;

- Workhouses were dehumanising. They separated families, stripped people of their dignity, and treated poverty like a moral failing.
- The system was designed to punish, not help. Dickens believed that the poor law was not designed to care for people, but to scare them out of asking for help (he wasn't wrong there).
- Children suffered the most. Dickens was especially angry that children were caught up in this system, growing up in cold institutions instead of loving homes.

He once described the New Poor Law as; "A piece of monstrous inhumanity." Ouch.

Why was he so incensed? Well, Dickens had the misfortune to know poverty firsthand. As a child, his father was sent to a debtor's prison, and young Charles was forced to work in a factory. He saw how easily people could fall into poverty and how brutal the system could be to those at the bottom.

He went on to not only write books, but to become one of the most powerful voices for compassion, reform, and social justice – and the workhouse was often in his firing line.

A debtor's prison was exactly what it sounds like: a prison for people who couldn't pay their debts. Yes, really.

If you owed money, be it rent, unpaid bills, or a loan, and you couldn't cough up the funds, the solution (according to the logic of the time) was to lock you up until you could.

This raises the obvious question: "how are people supposed to earn money to pay off their debt if they are behind bars?" The answer is simple: they couldn't. It was a deeply flawed system and one that thankfully was abolished following the passing of The Debtors Act of 1869.

The Slow Death of the Workhouse

The workhouse system didn't vanish in one go – it faded away bit by bit, over decades. Like a bad smell, or a bad idea everyone was too embarrassed to admit was a bad idea.

By the late 19th century, public opinion had begun to turn against the harshness of workhouses and people were starting to ask awkward questions like "do we really need to split families up?" and "why are we force-feeding gruel to the elderly?"

This led to massive public criticism. Charles Dickens certainly wasn't afraid to shame the system in print and many others got on board; campaigners, doctors and religious groups starting pushing for more humane treatment of the poor, particularly children and the elderly.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, Britain began to introduce new forms of welfare;

- Free School Meals (1906) – The Education (Provision of Meals) Act allowed Local Education Authorities to provide free school meals to children in primary schools, particularly those deemed unable to benefit from education due to lack of food.
- Old Age Pensions (1908) – A landmark piece of social welfare legislation, where those aged 70 and over were provided with a state-funded pension.
- National Insurance (1911) – Established a national system to protect people against loss of income due to sickness or un-employment.

With these new systems in place, fewer people needed to rely on the workhouse. Many workhouses were quietly turned into hospitals, care homes, or children's homes – often without changing the name (or the wallpaper). The workhouse stigma remained for many years, but slowly their function gradually shifted.

By 1929, The Local Government Act had officially ended the Poor Law Unions. Workhouses still remained in a sense, but were renamed things like "Public Assistance Institutions" which sounds much nicer than "workhouse" but was more often than not just a rebrand.

Following the Second World War, the National Health Service was introduced in 1948 and the workhouse system was finally, mercifully, abolished for good. Former workhouse buildings were either demolished, turned into hospitals, or used for social housing.

Some former workhouses still stand today, cleverly disguised as hospitals, council offices, or flats – quietly hiding their gruel-stained past under a fresh coat of paint.

Some Workhouses Still Standing Today

Ripon Union Workhouse - Yorkshire

There has been a workhouse on this site since 1776-77. Today the building has been converted into a museum, if you fancy a day out!

Gressenhall Workhouse – Norfolk

Established in 1777 as a "House of Industry." It later became a workhouse under the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. The Site is now a museum and a working farm. You can even get married here!

Southwell Workhouse – Nottinghamshire

Probably the best-preserved workhouse in England, the Southwell Workhouse was constructed in 1824 by Rev John Becher of Southwell and was one of the first in what later became a nationwide system of housing for poor people.

Billericay Workhouse - Essex

Built in 1839-40 on an 11 ½ acre site known as Stock Hill Field. It served as a place of last resort for the destitute of 25 local parishes, including Basildon. It later became St Andrew's Hospital, and when the hospital closed in 1998 was converted into flats.

"Hush-a-bye baby, on a tree top. When you grow old your wages will stop. When you have spent the little you made, first to the poorhouse and then to the grave."

Sources;

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