

WORKHOUSES – EXTRACT

Why and where did Workhouses start.

The origins of the workhouse can be traced to the Statute of Cambridge 1388, which attempted to address the labour shortages following the Black Death in England by restricting the movement of labourers, and ultimately led to the state becoming responsible for the support of the poor.

In 1530 the government of Henry VIII had passed into law an Act designed to deter vagrants from roaming from parish to parish further exacerbated by King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, which began in 1536.

The dissolution of the monasteries put extra pressure on the primitive poor relief system and begging increased. Thus, from 1536, it was an offence to give alms to able-bodied Poor.

The Act for the Relief of the Poor 1601, made parishes legally responsible for the care of those within their boundaries who, through age or infirmity, were unable to work.

The workhouse system evolved in the 17th century, allowing parishes to reduce the cost to ratepayers of providing poor relief. The first authoritative figure for numbers of workhouses was drawn up following a government survey in 1776. The inmates of workhouses were fed, clothed and sheltered but had to work to earn the cost of their care.

So keen were some Poor Law authorities to cut costs wherever possible that cases were reported of husbands being forced to sell their wives, to avoid them becoming a financial burden on the parish.

Inmates were set to work breaking rocks into smaller stones or for use in roadmending or construction. Ever wondered what the Jack and the Beanstalk giant meant when he said, "I'll grind his bones to make my bread"? Perhaps the giant is actually quite a keen horticulturalist using the bones as a fertiliser to help grow the wheat for his bread?

In February 1845, Hugh Munday, one of the Poor Law Guardians were elected by Andover in Hampshire and magistrate for the borough. He raised at the weekly meeting of the board of guardians rumours that paupers set to work to crush animal bones (to produce bone meal fertiliser) were in the habit of eating marrow and gristle still adhering to the bones.

Today, most gardeners would consider it essential to have a box of blood, fish and bone in their arsenal, but would never dream of applying processed human waste to their roses, let alone tomatoes. Yet increasingly farmers – in the UK and elsewhere – are permitted to use treated sewage sludge on their land. A good source of nitrogen and phosphorus, as well as organic matter, biosolids are slowly re-entering the food chain.

Wood-chopping was a work task often given to inmates. Corn-grinding (The Treadmill) - Each prisoner moved along the tread-wheel, left to right until a new prisoner joined at the far end. When 24 prisoners milled, the rest period was 12 minutes every hour. Gypsum-crushing - Gypsum crushing, was done on the same hand driven mill wheels as used in corn-crushing and probably without cleaning from one process to the other.

Picking Oakham - You may recall seeing the opening picture of children in the Oliver Twist Film, all "Picking Oakham". There was once a fibre "craft" that was used as punishment. It was hard labour that left the "crafter" with lifelong scars. It was called picking junk or picking oakum. Oakum pickers developed thick black scars on their hands from this work. They also suffered tendonitis, bursitis, nerve damage, and all those other conditions that result from repetitive stress motions.

Women in the Laundry - In some workhouses, identifying certain categories of inmate by clothing, style or colour. For example, prostitutes wore a yellow dress and unmarried pregnant women, a red one. In another workhouse, unmarried mothers were made to wear a 'jacket' of the same material and uniform, resulting in them being known as 'Jacket Women'.

Houses of Correction - By 1824, treadmills had been erected in at least 54 prisons in Britain, and the idea had spread to other countries too. During the second half of the 19th century, the penal treadmill became an instrument of torture.

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