

What were *workhouses*?

Before 1834, poor people were looked after in the parishes where they lived. Money was collected by overseers of the poor from those who owned land and had wealth. This money was used to help those in serious need – the sick, the elderly and the unemployed. Paupers often used the money to stay in their own homes rather than go to a 'poorhouse' where many paupers lived. This was called outdoor relief.

In 1834 a new system was set up to help deal with the poor in Britain. The New Poor Law made parishes group together to form *Poor Law Unions*. A *Board of Guardians* looked after the poor in each union.

From 1834 anyone who needed outdoor relief had to go to a workhouse if they wanted help. Here, paupers slept, ate and worked but to encourage them to go and find work outside they tried to make life as unpleasant as possible. Life inside could be miserable – work hours could be long, food could be poor and punishments could be harsh. But, not everyone hated the workhouses – some thought that the system cost people less, taught paupers how to behave properly made poor people work harder.

The people in charge of the New Poor Law were called Poor Law Commissioners - they produced plans and rules to help the unions to set up workhouses.

1. As soon as the pauper is admitted he shall be placed in a receiving room where he shall be examined by the medical officer.
2. If the Medical Officer finds any disease of mind or body, the pauper shall be placed in the sick ward or in such other ward as the Medical Officer shall direct.
3. If the Medical Officer finds the pauper to be healthy, the pauper shall be placed in the part of the workhouse according to his class.
4. The pauper shall be thoroughly cleansed and shall be clothed in workhouse dress. His own clothes shall be cleansed and returned to him when he leaves the workhouse.

A pauper who was found doing any of these things was to be given **only bread and potatoes for two days:**

- Making a noise during silence
- Using bad language
- Threatening to hit another pauper
- Not keeping clean
- Pretending to be sick
- Entering part of the workhouse which was for another class
- Refusing to work
- Playing cards
- Climbing over the workhouse wall
- Misbehaving during church services
- Returning late after an outside visit
- Disobeying an officer of the workhouse

A pauper who did any of these things was to be **locked up for a day:**

- Insulting the master or matron
- Disobeying the master or matron
- Hitting another pauper
- Damaging workhouse property
- Getting drunk
- Causing a disturbance during prayers

		Breakfast.		Dinner.				Supper.	
		Bread. oz.	Gruel. pints.	Cooked Meat, with Vegetables. oz.	Soup. pints.	Bread. oz.	Cheese. oz.	Bread. oz.	Cheese. oz.
Sunday	Men	7	2	5	..	..	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	5	..	..	..	5	1½
Monday	Men	7	2	..	2	7	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	..	2	5	..	5	1½
				Bacon.					
Tuesday	Men	7	2	4	..	..	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	4	..	..	..	5	1½
Wednesday	Men	7	2	..	2	7	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	..	2	5	..	5	1½
Thursday	Men	7	2	..	..	7	2	7	2
	Women	5	2	..	..	5	1½	5	1½
Friday	Men	7	2	4	..	..	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	4	..	..	..	5	1½
Saturday	Men	7	2	..	2	7	..	7	2
	Women	5	2	..	2	5	..	5	1½

No.4- CHILDREN AGED TWO YEARS TO THREE YEARS

	BREAKFAST			DINNER												SUPPER		
	Bread	Butter	Milk	Boiled Beef	Roast Beef	Boiled Mutton	Vegetables	Bread	Cheese	Broth	Rice Pudding	Pea Soup (Winter)	Barley Soup (Summer)	Hashed Meat	Irish Stew	Bread	Butter	Milk
	oz.	oz.	pt.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	oz.	pt.	oz.	pt.	pt.	oz.	pt.	oz.	oz.	pt.
SUNDAY	3	½	½	4	...	...	4	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3	½	½
MONDAY	3	½	½	...	...	...	...	3	...	½	...	...	...	...	...	3	½	½
TUESDAY	3	½	½	...	...	...	3	1	...	...	...	...	...	2	...	3	½	½
WEDNESDAY	3	½	½	...	2	...	4	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3	½	½
THURSDAY	3	½	½	...	...	...	...	2	...	...	...	...	½	...	...	3	½	½
FRIDAY	3	½	½	...	...	2	3	1	...	...	4	...	...	...	...	3	½	½
SATURDAY	3	½	½	...	...	...	...	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	½	3	½	½

Records of the food rations given to adults at Abingdon workhouse (top) and children at Powys workhouse (right)

I would also like to take this opportunity to point out about the need to set up a nursery class in every workhouse. This would be under the care of a trained female who would be responsible for all those children under the age of six. Workhouses that have these nurseries have benefited as result from healthier children and improved discipline. Mothers are allowed to feed their babies at all times and have them with them at night in the dormitories. As a result, the children are kept clean and safe during the daytime, and their meals are controlled by the medical officer.

Extract of an overseer's inspection report into workhouse nurseries

I have this day inspected the schools. The boys answered remarkably well in the Scriptures. Indeed, their religious knowledge would do credit to any school. Their arithmetic is fair and they possess greater knowledge of geography than is usually the case in schools of this description. Their reading is still much below their other attainments and their writing might be improved. I must say that it is impossible for one man to attend properly to a school of 80 boys.

Extract from a school inspector's report on the schools at Gressenhall workhouse, 1849

Children in the workhouse were often employed **breaking stones, cleaning, picking oakum (used to make rope).**

The following regulations were observed at Gressenham workhouse, 1851:

Hour of rising: 5.45am

Interval for breakfast: 6.30-7.00am

Time for work: 7.00-12.00noon

Interval for dinner: 12.00-1.00pm

Time for work: 1.00-6.00pm

Interval for supper: 6.00-7.00pm

Time for going to bed: 8.00pm

These times to be notified by ringing a bell and during the time of meals silence to be maintained.