



Living in the Victorian Workhouse

Comprehension Questions

1. Who took care of the poor before the 1830s?

2. In 1601, a poor law was implemented. What did it require?

3. What was 'outdoor relief'?

4. What had happened to the cost of caring for the poor between 1803 and 1818? Why?

5. What act was passed in 1834? What did this law say?

6. Give two ways in which the new workhouses were like prisons.



7. Name two things that children might expect to do in a workhouse.

8. What did the investigation into the Andover workhouse discover?

9. What was picking oakum?

10. How did the creation of the Welfare State in 1948 change the usefulness of workhouses?

Extension

Find out more about our current social security and welfare measures. Create a table comparing the treatment of those on benefits then and now.

Write a letter to workhouse bosses explaining why the lack of freedoms the 'inmates' have, is unfair.

Read one of the famous literary accounts of a workhouse. You might chose Dicken's descriptions in 'Oliver Twist' or the death of Fanny Robin in 'Far from the Madding Crowd'. What did you think of the description you read? Did you think the author was for or against the use of workhouses for the poor?



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Comprehension Questions - Answers

1. Who took care of the poor before the 1830s?

Monasteries and monks generally took care of the poor before the Reformation. Following this, the local parish (church) and local charities took care of the poor and destitute.

2. In 1601, a poor law was implemented. What did it require?

That ratepayers pay for the aid to the poor within the local parish. Ratepayers were those who owned or maintained property in the area.

3. What was 'outdoor relief'?

This was the sending of fuel (coal or wood) and food to the homes of the poor, trying to help them maintain their own homes.

4. What had happened to the cost of caring for the poor between 1803 and 1818? Why?

The cost doubled within a very short period of time. This was due to the large numbers of people moving from farming communities to the cities as the land they usually farmed was enclosed by landowners. There were the developments of the Industrial Revolution and a spike in population.

5. What act was passed in 1834? What did this law say?

The New Poor Law or Poor Law Amendment Act was passed in 1834. The act made it illegal to be poor and destitute and demanded that anyone finding themselves in this position should turn themselves into the police and thus be given a place in a workhouse.

6. Give two ways in which the new workhouses were like prisons.

Answers may vary as there were several things mentioned. Answers might include: those living in them were called 'inmates', there were strict rules about living inside the workhouse, the residents were expected to work for nothing, a scratchy and uncomfortable uniform was given to the residents, the families were segregated (men, women and children put in separate sections) and personal effects were removed on entry.

7. Name two things that children might expect to do in a workhouse.

Children could expect to be separated, at least some of the time from their families (mothers could see children under 7), children would attend school (up to 3 hours a day), children might work or be sent out to be apprentices. The girls would learn to sew, housekeep and cook and the boys would learn a trade or gardening skills.

8. What did the investigation into the Andover workhouse discover?

That the workhouse residents were reduced to eating the marrow from rotting bones for food. The inmates were starving.

9. What was picking oakum?

This meant picking apart old ropes from ships which had been treated with tar. It hurt the fingers and was a slow, repetitive work.

10. How did the creation of the Welfare State in 1948 change the usefulness of workhouses?

After the creation of the Welfare State, people who found themselves in need received help from the government directly. Institutions in which such people would be housed did not need to exist any longer. Councils became responsible for finding sufficient housing for people.

Extension

Find out more about our current social security and welfare measures. Create a table comparing the treatment of those on benefits then and now.

Students might look at current legislation or information from sites such as 'gov.uk'. They might include information about the NHS or look at the formation of the NHS and the welfare state as a separate task. Students might be asked to consider the worth of the social care system – there is much debate about a nationalised system of health care in America at the moment. Students might consider how the rules differ there.

Write a letter to workhouse bosses explaining why the lack of freedoms the 'inmates' have, is unfair.

Alternatively, students could take the opposing side and defend the treatment of the 'inmates'. This could be a starting point for a debate.

Read one of the famous literary accounts of a workhouse. You might chose Dickens's descriptions in 'Oliver Twist' or the death of Fanny Robin in 'Far from the Madding Crowd'. What did you think of the description you read? Did you think the author was for or against the use of workhouses for the poor?

Students might be asked to look specifically at the language used to describe the workhouse, the people who work there and the 'inmates'. How does Dickens show Oliver to be a blameless recipient of poor aid and how are the workhouse board members shown in a poor light? Looking at the illustrations used for the text might be helpful here. Students could go on to consider Dickens work as a social reformer or discuss whether those in the arts should become involved with politics.