Living in the Victorian Workhouse

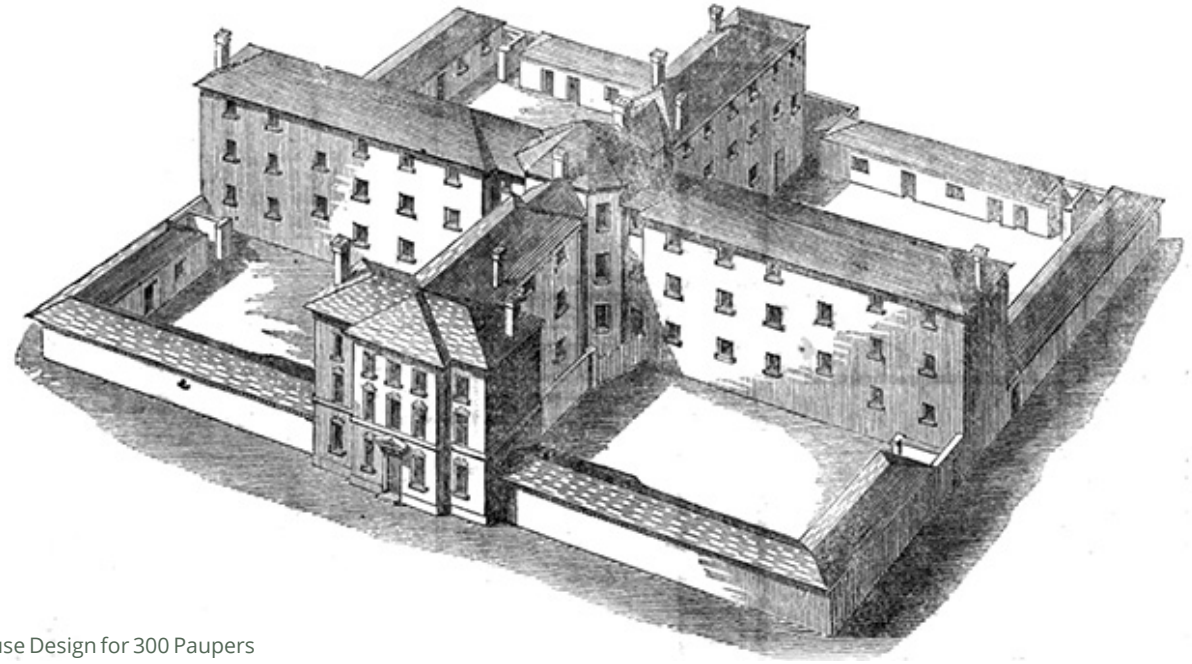
If you were very poor and homeless nowadays, where would you go for help? How many agencies and government schemes can you think of that aid those in need? In previous centuries, those who found themselves in desperate situations had very few choices.

Before the 1830s, poor aid was a parish affair. This meant that the poor were looked after by the local community. In medieval times the job usually fell to the local clergy (at an abbey or monastery for example) to help those in need. Monks would often provide alms (free food and lodgings) and medical care to the poor. With the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the 15th century, responsibility for the poor had to be taken up by someone else. Local church parishes took on the care of such people, tried to find work for the able-bodied and provided housing for their own impoverished. From 1601, the parishes were given this responsibility through a Poor Law which required that the care be paid for by a tax on 'ratepayers' (those who owned or occupied property in the area).

The cost of caring for the poor was steep and continued to rise steadily over the next two hundred years. Some parishes experimented with ways to limit the taxpayer's bills. They began to subsidise the wages of the poorest in the community, giving them additional pay so that they could maintain their own households rather than move into parish accommodation. In other areas 'outdoor relief' became common, helping the poor to stay in their homes by giving them things they needed, such as coal or food.

As the number of poor grew, taxpayers became dissatisfied with the situation. Many saw the poor as responsible for their own impoverished situations through want of thrift, morality or care. They did not think it was right to provide care for able-bodied adults and their families. And the situation was only getting worse – with the Enclosure Acts of the late 18th century and the movement of labourers and poor farmers into the cities, the cost of feeding and housing the poor was astronomical. The cost of relieving the poor in England and Wales in 1803 was about £4 million, while in 1818, it had doubled to £8 million.

Desperate times called for desperate measures and the late Georgian period measure was the workhouse. In 1834 parliament passed the Poor Law Amendment Act (or New Poor Law as it became known). This act made it illegal to be poor, destitute and homeless in England and Wales. If anyone found themselves homeless or incapable of caring for themselves, they were to report to the local police station and to apply for a ticket to the workhouse. Those who fell on hard times were no longer to be given handouts at home. The workhouse was to be the only charitable institution in the district eligible to take in the local poor.



Workhouse Design for 300 Paupers

Many small parishes banded together to form unions which could provide these workhouses for their communities. In this way, there would be one workhouse for a radius of 10-14 miles. By building bigger, these workhouses were more cost-effective than the smaller, single parish alms houses. By 1839 there were over 600 unions in operation in England and Wales.

While the institutions were set up with charity in mind, they became little better than prisons. Since many taxpayers had complained about the giving of alms to able-bodied men and women, the workhouses were set up to function as a deterrent for indigence. There was extreme supervision within the workhouse, personal possessions were removed, and families were separated from one another. Food was minimal but (supposedly) nourishing and boring, repetitive work was provided for those able to do it.

The language of the workhouse was the same as that for a prison. Those who were forced to make the workhouse their home were labelled as 'inmates'. They were stripped of their own clothes and possessions on arrival and forcibly washed, deloused and disinfected, before being made to put on a workhouse uniform of deliberately scratchy fabric. In some areas, unmarried mothers were forced to wear a special yellow uniform as a sign of their shame.

Young families were separated with the men and women living in separate dormitories and the children living in a school wing. While mothers were supposed to be given access to any children under seven years of age at 'all reasonable times', this was not strictly adhered to. In 1843 for example, it was reported in Punch that an infant of five months had been separated from its mother apart from brief periods for feeding. Older children might be sent out to work in factories or mines or might be apprenticed away from the workhouse, losing contact with their families.

Food was another issue within the workhouse. Fare was to be invariable and purposefully coarse. The three meals a day mainly consisted of bread and porridge, with cheese, potatoes and soup added to a midday meal. Meat might be provided twice a week. The food was meant to be filling and nourishing but, in certain instances, it was found to be contaminated or completely inappropriate for human consumption. In 1846, an investigation into the Andover workhouse heard that inmates had been found chewing the marrow out of rancid bones. Initially, the celebration of feast days such as Christmas was not to be observed in workhouses. The food was to remain the same as usual. In 1847 however, the New Poor Board relaxed the restrictions and allowed for extras to be provided for the Christmas meal and on other occasions.

Workhouses in Literature

Workhouses captured the imagination of many Victorian novelists. Some of these, like Charles Dickens, wrote about the conditions in an effort to encourage social change. Perhaps the most famous example of the workhouse in literature is that in 'Oliver Twist'. Oliver grows up in the workhouse environment as an orphan, whose mother died giving birth to him after being admitted to the institution. The portrayal of Mr and Mrs Bumble and the governors of the workhouse is both comic and chilling. Their response to Oliver's plaintive cry: "Please sir, I want some more." has become one of the best-known scenes in English literature.

Other characters whose experience of the workhouse is less than enjoyable include Betty Higden in 'Our Mutual Friend' who desperately fears the workhouse and the poor Fanny Robin in 'Far from the Madding Crowd' who dies in the workhouse while pregnant and desperate. Her subsequent funeral is equally poignant. The customary death knell cannot be rung since the workhouse won't pay for it.

Art Imitates Life!

In 1869, the new weekly newspaper The Graphic took to the stands. The newspaper was aimed at the middle classes who would generally read the Illustrated London News which had been founded in 1841. The new weekly paper wanted to show the wealthy of London what life was like for the other members of English society and it was bent on social reform.

Houseless and Hungry by Samuel Luke Fildes,
scanned by Philip V AllingAham for Victorian Web.org

The first edition featured an engraving by Samuel Luke Fildes entitled Houseless and Hungry and recreated the scene he had witnessed one snowy winter's night after arriving in London. He wrote: 'When I first came to London I was very fond of wandering about, and never shall I forget seeing somewhere near the Portland Road one snowy winter's night the applicants for admission to a casual ward.' The people in the picture are waiting for entry to the workhouse and Fildes chose each character to represent a type of 'English Poor'.

The picture had an immediate impact. John Everett Millais, a famous Victorian painter, was so taken with it that he advised Charles Dickens to use the artist for his next project. Dickens commissioned Fildes to produce the illustrations for his last novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood.

In 1874 the picture was produced as an oil painting, renamed Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward and shown in the Royal Academy's summer exhibition. While some critics thought it unsuitable material for a painting, thousands bought reproductions of the image, encouraging people to consider the issues of the poor in society.

The working day did not provide much of a relief from the tedium of life in the workhouse. The work provided for the inmates was meant to be of a punitive rather than useful nature. People were asked to perform menial tasks such as breaking stones for roads, breaking up bones to make fertiliser, turning a mill handle and picking oakum.

Picking oakum entailed taking lengths of old, tarred rope and unpicking the pieces. It was hard on the fingers and often performed by women or child inmates. In many workhouses, these tasks were to take place in silence.

Children at Crumpsall Workhouse circa 1895

Life in the workhouse was not so desperately bleak for some however. Young children were given an education (three hours a day) at a time before the Education Act of 1870 ensured the education of all children. Children were taught arithmetic, reading (and sometimes writing) in all workhouses, while some aspired to teach geography, complex mathematics and music. This meant that workhouse children were often better educated than their poor, but free, counterparts. Time was given for play as well as work and the children learned useful skills such as needlework and gardening. The principle was that 'all children … shall be trained to habits of usefulness, industry, and virtue.'

The elderly who were at the workhouse because they were too ill or old to work were deemed to be the 'blameless' or 'deserving' poor. Many of these people had no families to rely on for care and, having become too old to work, may have lost the dwelling that was 'tied' to their job. Those younger people with physical disabilities and some of those with mental disabilities would also belong to this category of inmate. They were often housed separately from the able-bodied population and spent their days in a day room, where they might gather and talk, or in a recreation yard.

Despite workhouses being available, many people lived in fear of having to enter them. The stigma of having been in the workhouse haunted people and many preferred to go homeless and hungry at times rather than endure the cruel segregation of these institutions. By 1929, the power and usefulness of such places was waning. With the signing of the Local Government Act, local authorities took over the running of the workhouses and many districts chose to convert them into municipal hospitals or the like.

In 1948, the modern Welfare State came into being. This was as radical as the Poor Law of 1834. It gave much greater access to financial benefits and provided, in new ways for the unemployed, elderly and ill. The new NHS (National Health Service) provided universal healthcare and so many of the workhouses became hospitals or wards of larger institutions. Some workhouses functioned as care and residential homes for a number of years. The days of the workhouse and the stigma and punishment that went along with being poor were over.

Women's mealtime at St Pancras Workhouse 1897