

Curriculum subject: History

Key Stage: 3

Theme: Poverty and the workhouse

### Rationale

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 provided - for all poor - relief to be delivered by the workhouse system. Conditions in the workhouse were often extremely poor and it was a last resort for those who entered. If workhouses were so bad, why did people go there? What was it like inside the workhouse? What do workhouses tell us about people's attitudes towards the poor in Victorian Britain? This activity, aimed at Key Stage 3, could form part of a wider study of the Victorian period and aims to explore the workhouse as a source of poor relief in the context of a wider study of the problem of poverty in the Victorian period.

### Content

#### Historical sources:

- [Poster responding to the New Poor Law \(c 1834\)](#)
- [Outline of the New Poor Law Amendment Act \(1842\)](#)
- [An Account of Four Persons Starved To Death in a Workhouse \(c 1769\)](#)

#### Recommended reading (short articles):

[The working classes and the poor](#) by Liza Picard

### Key questions

- What provision was available for the poor following the 1834 act?
- What were workhouses and what were conditions in workhouses like?
- What can workhouses tell us about attitudes to poverty?

### Activities

- 1) Show students the image only (ensuring that you do not reveal the descriptive text above) responding to The New Poor Law with a description of the new workhouses. What is going on in this image? Who are the different people? Where is it describing? What questions does it raise?
- 2) Introduce the 1834 Poor Law to students, explaining that the Act allowed for all poor relief to be delivered through the workhouse system. The above image describes the poor relief on offer in the workhouse. What was the workhouse and who would go there? Why might they go there and how would you decide if someone should be

admitted? What does the author of this source feel about the Poor Law Amendment Act?

- 3) Go back to the questions that the first image raised. What kinds of questions might students like to investigate? The direction of enquiry will be led by questions raised by students in response to the image shown earlier, but might include things like:
  - Did the workhouse offer better relief for the poor?
  - What kinds of work went on in the workhouse?
  - What kinds of punishments were carried out and why?
  - Who was in charge and what did their job involve?
  - Were there really that many people trying to get into the workhouse?
  - Why did the people have their heads shaved?
  - What did inmates eat?
  - Is this cartoon accurate?
  - What was it really like in the workhouse?
  - If conditions in the workhouse were so bad, why did people go there and why did they endure for so long (until 1930)?
  - Why were people in workhouses treated so badly? What was the moral purpose of the workhouse?
  - Did everyone agree with the moral purpose of the workhouse and/or the Poor Law? How do we know?
- 4) Work with students to decide which questions are major, those which are minor, and those which can be grouped under larger questions. Develop an overarching enquiry question and sub-questions that will help them to answer the main question. One example could be:

**Main: If conditions in workhouses were so bad, why did people go there?**  
Sub: What was the Poor Law?  
Sub: What was the workhouse system?  
Sub: What problems did the poor face? What made them go to the workhouse? Did they have any other choices?  
Sub: What do sources reveal about conditions in workhouses? Were they really that bad? How do we know?  
Sub: Did everyone agree with the workhouse system?
- 5) Working in groups, ask students to use the [Victorian Britain](http://www.victorian-britain.com) website and other sources to research the enquiry using primary evidence to support their conclusions. They might work through the whole enquiry or take different parts.
- 6) Students could present their findings (giving reasoned conclusions supported by evidence) in a variety of ways. For example, a written piece, a display or pop up exhibition, artistic impression, dramatic role play, website, documentary film etc.
- 7) Compare findings about the workhouses to an example of poor relief in a workhouse before the New Poor Law Amendment Act which relied upon parish outdoor relief (See [Account of four persons starved to death](#)). Did the Amendment Act do anything to improve poor relief?