

# **THE EARLY VICTORIAN WORKHOUSE**

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For several generations, American junior high school students have learned of the early Victorian workhouse from *Oliver Twist's* plaintive request for a second helping of gruel, "Please, sir, I would like some more."<sup>1</sup> If one trusts Dickens' description of workhouses in *Oliver Twist*, these were loveless institutions whose employees starved children, while pocketing their food money. Furthermore, Dickens makes it clear that the severity of the institution was because the local Guardians of the Poor were heartless men who believed:

[The workhouse] was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round... .<sup>2</sup>

How bad were conditions in the workhouses? Does the evidence support Dickens' portrayal of the workhouse, and the selfish and short-sighted motivations that he ascribes to the Poor Law of 1834? This paper, to avoid deforesting Canada, will confine itself to examining the workhouse system in effect in the ten years immediately following passage of the English Poor Law of 1834.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Dickens, 34.

From its Elizabethan<sup>3</sup> origins, the English Poor Law had sought to prevent “sturdy beggars” (as the able-bodied lazy were known) from taking advantage of the poor relief system. The workhouse<sup>4</sup> had been one of the strategies intermittently used to keep down poor relief costs by requiring the needy to give up the privacy and independence of their own home. “Outside relief” was relief in money or in kind that was *not* conditional on entering the workhouse. It was relief given “outside” the workhouse.

Whether residence in the workhouse was required or optional varied significantly from parish to parish and age to age. The Workhouse or General Act of 1722-23 prohibited outside relief<sup>5</sup> yet it is clear from extant records that at least some parishes continued to provide it, at least for the aged.<sup>6</sup> Gilbert’s Act of 1782 encouraged parishes to form unions to enjoy economies of scale in building poorhouses for orphans, the elderly, and the sick.<sup>7</sup> However, Gilbert’s Act required the parish to hire out the able-bodied poor to private employers. They were not cared for in the poorhouse.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> All sources consulted for this paper agree on the Elizabethan origins of the English Poor Law – all sources but one. Frederic Morton Eden, *The State of the Poor: A History of the Labouring Classes in England, With Parochial Reports* (1797; reprinted New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1971), xii, 4-7, provides very persuasive evidence that the Elizabethan Poor Law did not appear *ex nihilo*, but was a reform of poor laws dating from at least the time of Henry VIII.

<sup>4</sup> The terms workhouse and poorhouse are used interchangeably in the literature because the same institution often housed those who were required to work, and those who were not.

<sup>5</sup> John Duncan Marshall, *The Old Poor Law, 1795-1834*, (London: Macmillan, 1968), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ursula R. Q. Henriques, *Before the Welfare State: Social Administration in Early Industrial Britain*, (London and New York: Longman, 1979), 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Henriques, *Before the Welfare State*, 19. There were about 15,000 parishes in England; these were consolidated by the 1834 Poor Law into approximately 600 unions by the 1850s.

English society experienced dramatic structural changes after 1750, as the Industrial Revolution transformed the English economy. This by itself might have eventually led to reform of the existing Poor Law, as the laws appropriate to rural England were unsuitable for urban factory workers. The sudden price inflation of the Napoleonic Wars, however, created an economic crisis for the poor, accelerating reform. In many parishes, a rapidly growing class of paupers, many of them employed, but unable to support their families, besieged the Poor Law Guardians.<sup>9</sup>

In the spring and summer of 1795, in many English towns, the poor took the matter of rising food prices into their own hands. Mobs (largely of women and children) imposed their own notions of a fair price for grain by seizing it and deciding in public meetings what price was fair. To the worried government, these were “food riots,” ominously similar to recent events in France.<sup>10</sup>

In response to these genteel English “riots,” as well as more serious violence directed at King George III, both Parliamentary and parochial actions sought to alleviate this brewing crisis. Parliament temporarily

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Mary MacKinnon, “English Poor Law Policy and the Crusade Against Outrelief,” *Journal of Economic History*, XLVII:3 [September 1987], 605, n. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Eden, *The State of the Poor*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond G. Cowherd, *Political Economists and the English Poor Laws: A Historical Study of the Influence of Classical Economics on the Formation of Social Welfare Policy*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1977), 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Charles F. Bahmueller, *The National Charity Company: Jeremy Bentham's Silent Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 33-34.

replaced tariffs on grain with bounties to encourage importation.<sup>11</sup> William Pitt's 1795 Poor Law reforms again gave parishes the outside relief option, authorizing justices of the peace to grant outside relief for one month "and from time to time as occasion shall require."<sup>12</sup> But even before Parliament acted, justices of the peace in Speenhamland, Berkshire, had enacted their own reforms.

In May of 1795, the Speenhamland justices of the peace mandated a system of outside relief that included both "bread scales" and family allowances. Under this system, relief payments were a supplement to wages. The current price of bread, and the size of the pauper's family, determined the amount of relief. Controversy still rages as to whether the Speenhamland system was actually "new," and how widely it spread through England.<sup>13</sup>

Why did England abandon the local autonomy, humanity, and outside relief of the Speenhamland System and move to the 1834 Poor Law, with its severe limitations on outside relief? All public policy derives from certain assumptions that are rooted in the prevailing climate of opinion. It is impossible to understand the English Poor Law of 1834 without understanding the theories of population growth and poverty causation predominant at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>11</sup> Bahemueller, *National Charity Company*, 34-37.

<sup>12</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> Marshall, *The Old Poor Law*, 13. Bahemueller, *National Charity Company*, 37-38.

To most early nineteenth century intellectuals (*i.e.*, the principal molders of educated public opinion of the time), the “poor” included the vast majority of the population. It included “all persons who, lacking property and profession, had to work for a living or who, unable to work, became dependent upon charity or relief for their subsistence.”<sup>14</sup>

Nor was the existence of poverty, by this definition, a social evil. The poor were not only inevitable, they were necessary to the society. Poverty was the motivation that made people work. Whom else but the poor would do “the most servile, the most sordid, and the most ignoble offices in the community”?<sup>15</sup> Within the poor there were both the independent poor, and the dependent poor. The independent poor were the masses of the population, able to care for themselves. The dependent poor, or paupers, required support by either the government or charity.

Intellectuals further subdivided paupers into the able-bodied and the impotent. The impotent included everyone unable to work: small children, the elderly, the sick, the disabled. The able-bodied were divided into “sturdy beggars,” who preferred begging to work; those who could not find work

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<sup>14</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 245. Bahemueller, *National Charity Company*, 85-86.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Townsend, *A Dissertation on the Poor Laws* (1786), 39-40, quoted in J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), xvi-xvii. Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 6-7. Bahemueller, 86.

(often because of cyclical unemployment); and those who were employed but whose wages would not support themselves and their family.<sup>16</sup>

Most intellectuals perceived the working poor as unable to feed their families because they had too many children, or at least more than their jobs could support. In an era before effective birth control, to marry early increased the odds that you would have a large family. In the ideology of the Poor Law Reformers, these were “improvident marriages.”<sup>17</sup> All these distinctions of able-bodied paupers became very important to the development of the 1834 Poor Law workhouse.

Another economic assumption was the “wage-fund.” This theory argued that the total wages available for payment to laborers in an economy was static, as long as the capital available to the economy was static. One could change the *distribution* of wages among the workers, but the fundamental quantity of wealth available to be paid in wages was constant, unless the available capital changed. Taxation might move capital from private hands to public hands, but it would not change the supply of wages to be paid. At best, such a movement of capital would leave the sum of workers’ wages unchanged. At worst, capital moved by taxation into governmental hands might be less efficiently invested, reducing demand for labor.

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<sup>16</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 245-246. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 159-163.

<sup>17</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 230-231. Perhaps reflecting how rapidly childhood disease has disappeared in the West, none of the works consulted for this paper mentioned

The “wage-fund” theory argued that to increase the wages of workers required either more capital, or fewer workers. Increasing poor relief would increase poor rates. This would reduce wages available to pay laborers, thus pushing some independent poor into the ranks of the dependent poor.<sup>18</sup>

This assumption that the economy was a zero-sum game pit paupers against rate payers. This is especially ironic because Britain was about to embark on a period when technological change and its associated improvements in economic efficiency dramatically enlarged the supply of wages relative to capital.

At the same time, *laissez-faire* had become economic dogma. Advocates of minimum wage and maximum work hour laws argued their cases for improving the lot of the poor. Economists (by this point, nearly all of whom were priests of the *laissez-faire* faith) successfully countered that such laws promoted economic inefficiency.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the efficiency arguments, the history of English wage regulation created a strong distaste among many intellectuals for such laws. The vast majority of previous English wage regulations had set *maximum* wages, not *minimum* wages. Consequently, economists tended to think of wage regulation as inherently unfair to

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high infant mortality rates as a reason for large families. Yet six children might be necessary to have a reasonable hope that three would survive to adulthood.

<sup>18</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 57-58.

<sup>19</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 12-14.

workers, and so regarded with suspicion any system that interfered with free market wages.<sup>20</sup>

Another dominant socioeconomic assumption came from Thomas Malthus' seminal work on population, *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). Malthus' argument that the population would grow faster than the food supply, creating a "redundant population," had won many converts by the 1820s.<sup>21</sup> A related assumption was that poor relief promoted the growth of this "redundant population" that could never catch up with the supply of food and employment. The lazy would seek outside relief, which was an incentive to not work for those with very short-term goals. In addition, as long as there was a safety net to make sure that no one would starve, this would encourage "improvident marriages" by those who did not engage in long-term, prudent planning.<sup>22</sup>

There were three major political factions involved in passage of the 1834 Poor Law: most important was Jeremy Bentham and his followers, the Utilitarians. Theirs was the dominant ideology that pushed for the abolition of outside relief, and the workhouse as a disincentive to seeking relief.<sup>23</sup> Bentham and most of his followers would have preferred a complete abolition

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<sup>20</sup> Bahemueller, *National Charity Company*, 38-39.

<sup>21</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 19-20; Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>22</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 230-231.

<sup>23</sup> Bahemueller, *National Charity Company*, 88-89; Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, xxiii-xiv.

of poor relief, at least for those born after a certain date. Such an extreme position was not politically feasible.<sup>24</sup>

A second faction were the Evangelicals, who had worked throughout the first two decades of the century to continue Pitt's humane 1795 Poor Law reforms. Increasingly, however, they accepted Malthusian doctrine that poor relief aggravated the misery of the paupers. By feeding and housing paupers, poor relief would take away incentives for them to exercise the Victorian virtues of self-discipline and thrift. This absence of self-discipline created more paupers, who in turn, required more poor relief. The risk seemed very high that such a feedback loop could impoverish the entire society in just a few generations.<sup>25</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville eloquently described this concern after visiting Britain in the early 1830s:

But I am deeply convinced that any permanent, regular, administrative system whose aim will be to provide for the needs of the poor, will breed more miseries than it can cure, will deprave the population that it wants to help and comfort, will in time reduce the rich to being no more than the tenant-farmers of the poor, will dry up the sources of savings, will stop the accumulation of capital, will retard the development of trade, will benumb human industry and activity, and will culminate by bringing about a violent revolution in the State, when the number of those who receive alms will have become as large as those who give it, and the indigent, no longer being able to take from the impoverished rich the means of providing for his needs, will find it easier to plunder them of all their property at one stroke than to ask for their help.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 136. Nassau Senior and Edwin Chadwick, two prominent members of the Royal Commission of 1832, are considered "Benthamites" by most historians of the 1834 Poor Law. Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 156-158, argues that Senior and Chadwick were ideologically at significant variance from Jeremy Bentham as to the cause and proper solution to pauperism.

<sup>25</sup> Bahemueller, *National Charity Company*, 88-89; Poynter, *Society and Pauperism*, xxiii-xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, "Memoir on Pauperism" (1835), quoted in Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 151. A question not raised by Himmelfarb (though perhaps it should have been) is the extent to which Tocqueville's concerns reflected uneasiness about Britain's similarities to pre-Revolutionary France.

Instead, the Evangelicals changed their emphasis from simple relief to promoting education, temperance, thrift, and prudence among the paupers. Thus, their opposition to the 1834 Poor Law was somewhat muted, and primarily concerned with the details of the law, not the underlying idea of discouraging poor relief.<sup>27</sup>

The third significant faction were the property owners. Only the land owners paid parish poor rates. Many of them believed (perhaps incorrectly) that poor rates were rising to take care of an increasing pauper class. There had been food price and mechanization riots intermittently throughout the period after the Napoleonic Wars, and the gentry were nervous that more relief meant more breeding of paupers, and thus, more disturbances.<sup>28</sup> The “Captain Swing” disturbances of 1830 certainly contributed to the gentry’s support for the new Poor Law.<sup>29</sup> The Malthusian argument persuaded the gentry to accept measures that they regarded as harsh in the short-term, but in the long run, were thought likely to alleviate poverty with its consequences: misery, riot, and higher taxes.

Yet the gentry had another motivation besides the concern about tax rates. In their perception, the wealthy tenant farmers were manipulating the wages and employment of the laborers to intentionally drive some of

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<sup>27</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 31-42.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law: The Politics of Inquiry, Enactment, and Implementation, 1832-1839*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1978), 146, describes how gentry resistance to the Poor Law of 1834 often evaporated after local disturbances persuaded them of the need to do something about the paupers.

them onto poor relief. The tenant farmers then used the consequent rise in poor rates (paid by the landed gentry, not the tenant farmers) as a bargaining chip in negotiating lower rents.<sup>30</sup>

These three factions, by their actions and inaction, created the environment that brought about the 1834 Poor Law in its final form. Its restrictions on outside relief required that henceforth, relief for able-bodied paupers (and their families), would be in a workhouse, or not at all. (As with the 1722-23 Workhouse Act, parishes continued to evade the intent of the law by taking advantage of various emergency exceptions to the statute and regulations.)<sup>31</sup> The Benthamite Utilitarians had spent considerable time and energy developing a theory of the workhouse, and practical plans for how they should be run. As often happens, what was implemented was not what was designed.

Since the goal of the workhouse was to discourage idlers from going on poor relief, and to discourage imprudent behavior, the Benthamites sought to create “less-eligible conditions.” This meant that conditions in the workhouse for the able-bodied should be somewhat worse than the conditions for the worst jobs in the private sector.<sup>32</sup> In this, the workhouses succeeded splendidly – though not in quite the way that Dickens’ portrayal suggests.

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<sup>29</sup> Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 152-153.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Anne Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution*, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 17-18; Henriques, *Before the Welfare State*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Brundage, *Making of the New Poor Law*, 112.

<sup>32</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 93-94, 146.

Contrary to *Oliver Twist*, it appears that the *quantity* of food was seldom an issue. There were isolated, and highly publicized cases of workhouses that failed to feed their charges adequately.<sup>33</sup> *The Times* published horrendous news accounts of torture, “starvation, deprivation, disease, exposure, flogging... crowding, solitary confinement, and the breakup of families”<sup>34</sup> – two million words were devoted to these stories over five years. Yet *The Times* made no attempt to verify the accuracy of these stories before publishing them, and the most egregious examples, upon investigation, were patently false. Many other incidents reported by *The Times* were exaggerated. Others were leftovers from the old Poor Law specifically prohibited by the 1834 reforms, and could not be placed at the feet of the new law.<sup>35</sup>

There is general agreement among historians that “physical cruelty was neither the intention nor the usual practice of the system.”<sup>36</sup> Food was generally adequate in quantity, though boring.<sup>37</sup> Crowding was not *generally* a problem; by the 1850s, workhouses were 50%-70% occupied.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, the Poor Law Commissioners established workhouse standards of food, clothing, and shelter that were apparently superior to that which would

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<sup>33</sup> Henriques, *Before the Welfare State*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 184-185.

<sup>36</sup> Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, 270.

<sup>37</sup> Henriques, *Before the Welfare State*, 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> MacKinnon, “English Poor Law Policy...”, 605.

be experienced by the poorest laborers on the outside. It was in the area of discipline that the workhouse was “less-eligible.”<sup>39</sup>

Primarily, the workhouse sought to discourage the able-bodied from going on poor relief by making workhouses institutionally like prisons. Indeed, the Poor Law Commissioners may have wanted the poor to view the workhouses with greater horror than the actual conditions justified.<sup>40</sup> Especially if the goal was to discourage not just the immediate idlers, but also those contemplating “improvident marriage” or other irresponsible behavior, this would have been a very clever strategy.<sup>41</sup>

Even before the 1834 Poor Law, to go into a workhouse meant the loss of many freedoms. Inmates were not free to come and go at will; they lost the privacy of their own home; and they were given unpleasant work, such as breaking stones into gravel for road repair. The workhouse provided its inmates food and shelter, but no more than the bare necessities.

The 1834 Poor Law added to the workhouse’s existing disincentives by prohibiting inmates from enjoying tobacco or alcohol; requiring inmates to wear uniforms; by segregating adults by sex, and prohibiting married couples from cohabitation. The Benthamites intended segregation of inmates by age, sex, and cause of their poverty. They believed that children should not be exposed to the unwed mothers, the sturdy beggars, and lunatics. Segregation

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<sup>39</sup> Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, 40-44.

<sup>40</sup> Henriques, *Before the Welfare State*, 49-50; Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 186-187.

<sup>41</sup> Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, 17.

by sex would prevent cohabitation, even by married couples, thus adding to the disincentives of accepting poor relief.<sup>42</sup> Preventing cohabitation also prevented production of more hungry mouths.

Had the 1834 Poor Law actually created this sort of segregation, there would have been no need to impose the “less-eligible” conditions on the children, the elderly, the disabled, and the insane. Of course to do this would have required the Poor Law Unions to build separate workhouses for different classifications, or at least provide for segregation within single buildings, as the Royal Commission of 1832 proposed.

The Poor Law Commission established by the 1834 law apparently preferred to use the existing parish workhouses, each of which would have been of a size appropriate to a particular class of paupers. But the Poor Law Union guardians preferred single buildings, with everyone under one roof. One reason was the desire for a single impressive building that would intimidate paupers who might otherwise resist the workhouse.

In spite of their own desires, the Poor Law Commission accepted the clear local preference for single large workhouses, at least partly because of economy: the number of inspectors was small, and the fewer workhouses, the

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<sup>42</sup> Cowherd, *Political Economists*, 235; Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 163-165.

more frequently inspectors could visit every establishment.<sup>43</sup> (The average workhouse in 1849 held 225 inmates.)<sup>44</sup>

Dickens' novels have given the workhouses established by the 1834 Poor Law an undeservedly bad reputation. While conditions were unpleasant (intentionally so), it was not in the material sense that the inmates of the workhouse suffered, but in the loss of freedoms. Unlike the *material* conditions of the workhouse, the working classes appear to have resented the loss of their freedoms brought about by the abolition of outside relief.

The overwrought accounts of the *physical* deprivation of the workhouse apparently do not reflect how the poor perceived it. It is more likely that comfortable members of the upper and middle classes were horrified by conditions that were no worse than many working class families outside the workhouse experienced. The riots and near-riots that accompanied the imposition of the new law in 1835 were seldom because of the ending of outside relief itself. Nicholas Edsall's account of these disturbances shows that the pauper objections, while varying from parish to parish, were usually *not* complaints about the physical conditions of the workhouses.

In the Milton Poor Law Union in Kent, the Poor Law Guardians decided to replace the existing outside relief cash payments with payments in kind,

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<sup>43</sup> Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, 37-43; Brundage, *Making of the New Poor Law*, 94-95.

<sup>44</sup> Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, 127.

through a form of food stamps. The long queues caused by centralizing all relief payments in a single village may have shortened tempers as well.

More typical were the disturbances in Amersham Union in Buckinghamshire. Here the objection was not to the workhouse requirement, but to the consolidation of the paupers into a *single* workhouse, removing paupers from their home parishes. In Eastbourne, separation of married couples led to near-riot. In the Uckfield Union, the consolidation of paupers already in parish workhouses was again the source of violence.<sup>45</sup>

Since the workhouse system already existed in many parishes, it would appear that the paupers had some idea of the material conditions which they could expect once outside relief was abolished. Edsall's account suggests that the paupers' notions of workhouse material conditions largely conformed to what dispassionate historians have concluded: the misery of the workhouse was *not* the decline in living standards.

Erroneous data and assumptions certainly underlay creation of the 1834 Poor Law workhouses. In retrospect, the Poor Law Reformers' certainty about the number of paupers, poor rates, and economics, seem presumptuous. Nonetheless, their motivations were not generally selfish, and their concerns about outside relief appear to have been based on concern about the long-term pauperization of the entire society.

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<sup>45</sup> Nicholas C. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement: 1834-44*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971), 27-31.

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