

Workhouse Life

What Was a Workhouse?

Workhouses were used during the Victorian time in the 1800s. A workhouse was a huge building which was built for paupers, who either could not get a job or were not well enough to work.

If the poor did not live in a workhouse, they would end up homeless or in prison!

A Last Resort

Entering a workhouse was the last thing people wanted to do. It was meant to put lazy people off, who did not make any effort to find work. If a man had to enter a workhouse, his whole family had to go with him. It was thought to be shameful because it meant he could not look after his own family.

Organisation of a Workhouse

The men, women, and children lived separately; children were only allowed to spend a short amount of time a week with their parents. However, most children in a workhouse were orphans.

Everyone slept in large dormitories. It was common for girls to sleep four to a bed.

Children in Workhouses

Children had lessons in reading, writing, arithmetic and Christian religion. It was later not thought important for poor children to be able to write.

Teachers were often cruel and strict. Children were not supposed to be hit, but many people have reported that they were caned in class.

Girls had some lessons, but were usually taught how to sew, and other skills that would help them become a maid or servant at the age of fourteen.

Jobs in the Workhouse

Work in a workhouse was meant to be very hard.

Food

Food was mainly bread, broth and cheese, and sometimes meat.

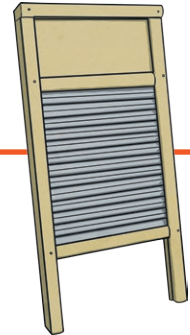
A common punishment was missing a meal.



Clothing

Everyone had to wear a uniform of hard, dull material. It was made to last rather than for comfort.

Men	stone breaking grinding corn chopping wood
Women	laundry cleaning scrubbing walls and floors



Many people in the workhouse never left.

They were closed in 1930. The buildings were then used for hospitals and care homes.

Illness

Ringworm was a common illness to have. It was an infectious disease of the skin, commonly on the head. Children had to have their head shaved and have iodine lotion rubbed into their head. It was very embarrassing.

Useful words

pauper: a very poor person

orphan: a child whose parents had both died

dormitories: large bedrooms with many beds

broth: a thin, watery sort of soup

caned: being hit with a stick or ruler

arithmetic: maths and number work

Questions

1. What was a workhouse?

2. What would happen to a poor person who did not go into a workhouse?

3. Why was it shameful for a man with a family to have to live in a workhouse?

4. What were the main foods in the workhouse?

5. Do you think people wanted to wear the workhouse uniforms? Explain your reasons.

6. Name two subjects the children were taught in a workhouse school.

7. How do we know that teachers were often cruel?

8. Why did girls not have all the same lessons as boys?

9. Which of the jobs do you think sounds the most difficult and why?

10. Why would having ringworm be embarrassing?

11. Give two reasons why you would not want to live in a workhouse.

Answers

1. What was a workhouse?
A workhouse was a huge building built for all the poor people who could not get a job or were not well enough to work.
2. What would happen to a poor person who did not go into a workhouse?
If a poor person did not go into a workhouse, they could end up homeless or in prison.
3. Why was it shameful for a man with a family to have to live in a workhouse?
It was shameful for a man with a family to have to live in a workhouse because it would mean he could not look after his family.
4. What were the main foods in the workhouse?
The main foods in a workhouse meal were bread, broth and cheese.
5. Do you think people wanted to wear the workhouse uniforms? Explain your reasons.
Answers may vary. For example: People would not want to wear the uniform because it was hard wearing.
6. Name two subjects the children were taught in a workhouse school.
Children were taught to read, write, arithmetic and religion. (Accept any two.)
7. How do we know that teachers were often cruel?
We know that teachers were often cruel because it has been reported that children had been caned in class.
8. Why did girls not have all the same lessons as boys?
Girls did not have the same lessons as boys because they would go on to be a maid or servant at the age of 14, so they needed to know learn how to sew and other skills for that job.
9. Which of the jobs do you think sounds the most difficult and why?
Answers will vary.
10. Why would having ringworm be embarrassing?
Ringworm would be embarrassing because you had to have your head shaved and have a smelly lotion rubbed into your head. Everyone would know you had ringworm.
11. Give two reasons why you would not want to live in a workhouse.
Answers will vary. For example: People would not want to live in the workhouse because it was considered shameful. Also, the work people had to do was very hard and strenuous; consequently, they would not like to live in the workhouse.