

All About the Workhouse

History Hackers: Victorian Venture



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The Workhouse

The workhouse was a place in the Victorian era, built to provide somewhere for the poor to live and work if they had no home or job. People might need to enter the workhouse for many different reasons, such as old age or illness.



Workhouses were huge buildings that were able to accommodate large numbers of people. The conditions were often unpleasant and people were put to work to earn their food and accommodation. For many, the alternative to entering the workhouse was prison!

The three-storey workhouse on York's Huntington Road loomed up from the ground like a giant demonic cliff face. Pokey windows gazed down onto the street below as if they were eyes searching for new victims.

People in the Workhouse

Staff in the workhouse included the master (the person in charge), the matron, a nurse or medical officer, and a teacher. The workhouse was meant to discourage lazy people from thinking that the workhouse was an easy option. These people were responsible for making sure that this was the case!



First, there was Master Watts, the governor. Apparently, he was in charge of everything, including the male paupers. Matron Watts, the governor's wife, claimed that she was in charge of the women and children. There was a nurse too, although Tilda had yet to meet her.

Organisation

All workhouse inmates were classified into groups, and were made to live and work in separate areas of the building. Men, women and children were all separated. Very young children were allowed to stay with their mothers, but once they were old enough, they were moved to a different area.



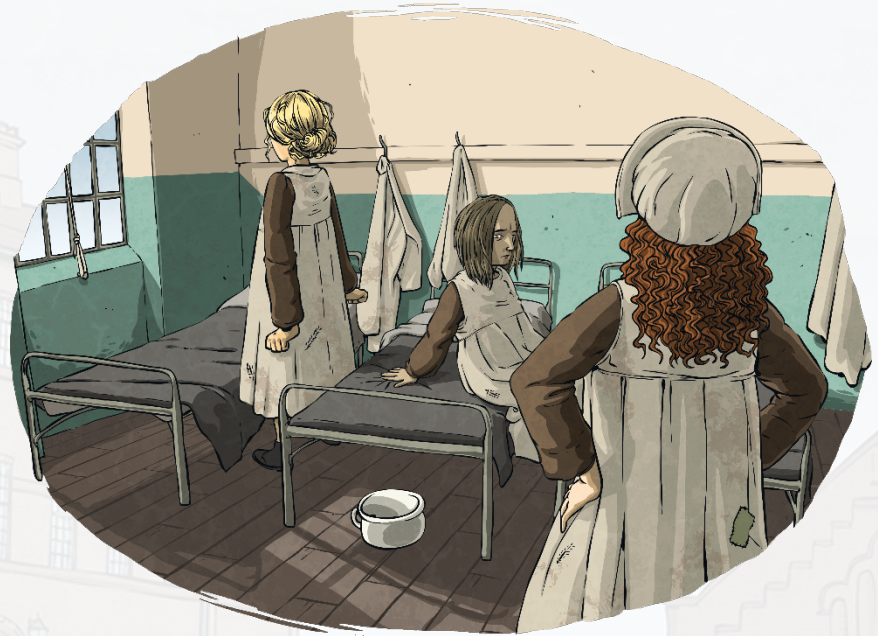
This meant that families were split up inside the workhouse and could only spend a short amount of time together each week.

“Men and women are kept separately,” she told them. “Meeting up is definitely out of bounds.”

Dormitories and Sleeping

Dormitories were used for sleeping. On each dormitory, there would often be lots of people in the same room and very little privacy.

Rows of beds would line a single dormitory. Beds were very basic and sometimes had to be shared. Blankets were provided but not always sheets or pillows.



Dozens of spindly metal bed frames lined the walls. Each bed was topped by two or three scratchy grey blankets, and what passed for a pillow served to illustrate that comfort was an unnecessary luxury.

Food

Food was provided but, as with everything else, it was only very basic offerings.

For breakfast, a very thin type of porridge, called gruel, was served. Other meals included bread, cheese, potatoes or soup. Occasionally, meat may have been served. Where possible, produce grown at the workhouse was used in meals.

The same, sometimes tasteless, servings were given day after day.



Agatha's laughter chased them down the dormitory like the rattle of machine-gun fire. "You don't get food unless you've earned it – and you don't earn it unless you work. That's why they call this place a workhouse."

Clothes

Workhouse clothes were basic, uncomfortable, dull and often dirty. Worn as uniform, women had shapeless dresses worn with an apron; men had jackets, trousers and cotton shirts worn with a cap. All of these were often poorly fitted and made from coarse material. They were designed to last a long time rather than be comfortable or nice to wear.



Minutes later, they were handed a matching set of uniforms. Little more than shapeless cotton shifts, the plain white pinafores had clearly been used many times before – the collection of stains and badly darned tears told a lifetime of stories. When she reluctantly hauled the garment over her shoulders, the itchy material scratched her skin like straw.

Work

Unpleasant jobs, such as oakum-picking, were common in the workhouse.

For men, other work might have included breaking stones, working in the fields or grinding corn. Women would be made to scrub floors, clean kitchens or wash laundry.

Even children would have to work to earn their food.



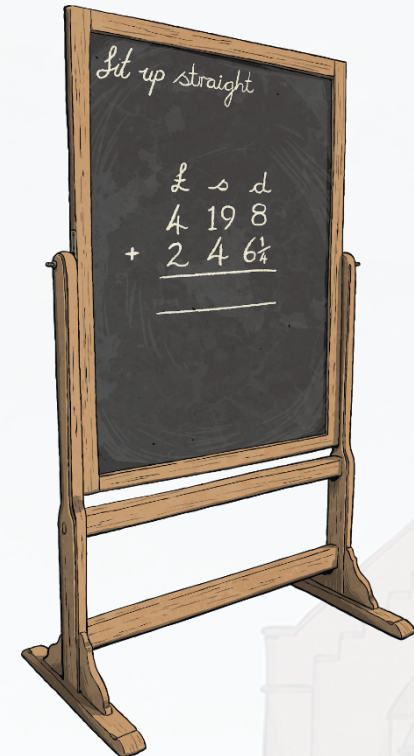
They worked without speaking. The thick knots of old rope were almost impossible to unpick; years of use had tightened them into solid blocks, so it wasn't long before both girls' fingertips were shredded and blooded.

Education

Children were expected to have three hours of lessons per day.

Boys were taught arithmetic, reading and, sometimes, writing. Girls were more commonly taught needlework and domestic duties so that they could get a job as a maid or servant when they were older.

There were no toys, games or books, and the teachers were very strict!



"I thought that this was the education room," Tilda picked up a small square of white linen. "But this doesn't feel like a school – what lesson is this?"

Good or Bad?

Despite poor conditions, the workhouse provided an alternative to prison or having no home at all.

What do you think – were the workhouses a good or bad idea?



"We give people a roof over their heads, a bed to sleep in and three meals a day. All we ask in return is good behaviour and hard work."



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