

**THE NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITISH WORKHOUSE:
MISSION NOT ACCOMPLISHED
FOR SCHOLARLY WORKS CONFERENCE
April 17, 2019**

SLIDE 1:

Hello everyone, my name is Brenda Derin and I today I will be presenting material from my Senior Thesis on the British Workhouse System of 1834-1948.

SLIDE 2:

The overpopulation caused by the Industrial Revolution had a tremendous impact on the average British person, with the poor often succumbing to homelessness, hunger and deprivation. Here, Victorian street children pose in their rags, waiting to beg or steal enough money to eat. If all else failed, these children, along with any other destitute person, could enter a local workhouse. Workhouses were buildings built by the government, using tax-payer money, to warehouse the poor. Today I will show that these workhouses did not live up to their own mission statement to support the populace they were built to help. Instead, hunger and punishment were rampant, while inadequate medical care often forced people to an early grave.

SLIDE 3:

Here I list some of the historical sources I used to conduct research for my senior project. The materials were so interesting I often spent hours pouring over what had been written.

SLIDE 4:

Now, take a moment and picture yourself as one of these people as I describe their predicament. You are standing outside and it's really, really cold, and your coat is too thin to keep out the chill. You're wrapping it tighter around you but it's not really helping. Your stomach is growling and it hurts terribly because the last time you ate was a couple of days ago and it was just a quarter slice of bread. And you are **so, so tired**, from having walked for miles and miles to arrive here. You are huddled next to a red brick building, along with men, women and children of all ages, from babies to the elderly, who are waiting for a large wooden door to open. No one really greets anyone else, as they are too ashamed to look at each other, AND you feel it is a disgrace to be here. There is a creaking sound, and finally a scowling man opens the door and looks at you in disdain.

SLIDE 5:

Welcome to the workhouse of 1834 Britain, a place so reviled that even its name became a curse word. This architectural drawing of one such workhouse shows four distinct areas where men, women, boys and girls were mandated to live, separated from each other, and family members, while watched over day and night by a warden, much like in a prison. There were strict rules and punishment if you didn't obey or work. Negligence and filth were common, and many people died within their walls. Why were places like THIS built?

SLIDE 6:

Victorian England was bursting with individuals needing help like these people. In nineteenth century Britain, there were no government social services, such as food pantries, medical clinics or subsidized housing programs. There was no safety net. Many poor people either lived in slums or on the streets,

SLIDE 7:

Here street BEGGARS pursue an upper class woman, either to beseech her for money, or rob her pockets. On the other side, an elderly man asks for charity from a gentleman. Neither appears to be willing to help. Tax payers were burned out from being approached by beggars like these.

Britain was a Christian nation and believed TRULY needy, like orphans and the disabled should be helped. However, they also believed that able-bodied people should work for a living, no matter how old, or young, they were. These were the days before child labor laws. Everyone, no matter how young or old, was expected to **contribute**.

SLIDE 8:

Here throngs of desperate people beg to be let into the GOVERNMENT SPONSORED union workhouse. But within the crowd, on the right bottom corner, there appears to be a family debating if they should go inside to receive services. Why would they hesitate? What were they afraid of?

SLIDE 9:

Workhouses had terrible reputations. Most of them earned. Although this illustration is from the eighteenth century, it depicts an incident that actually occurred in the Datchworth workhouse in Hertfordshire where a family was literally starved to death. Drawings like these lived in the mind of the populace and terrified them

In 1832, Parliament passed the Poor Law Amendment Act. This act put in writing that people could no longer be given any form of charity directly from parishes such as money. Instead, they MUST enter the workhouse and work hard to earn food and lodging while living within its walls. However, stipulated within the SAME Act was a rule entitled Less Eligibility that stated conditions in workhouses had to be worse than the conditions available outside. Workhouses should be uncomfortable places and give just the bare minimum food and shelter to keep people alive. The rich felt this would deter people from claiming poor relief and would weed out those wanting help just because they were lazy.

SLIDE 10:

To make matters even more complicated, in 1836, Parliament wrote a purported mission statement for all workhouse. Here are six of their goals. In my thesis, I looked at whether all the elements of the mission statement were met, given the restrictions of the rule of Less Eligibility. Due to time constraints today, I won't address each provision of the Mission Statement. However, as examples, I will show how numbers 1 and 5 were not met.

SLIDE 11:

Did the workhouse provide wholesome food? Here, a young boy in a workhouse asks for more porridge from a disbelieving master. (You may recognize him as Oliver Twist from the eponymous novel.)

What food was available in the workhouse was usually quite meager and not very nutritious. We have written testimony from a workhouse inmate that affirms this.

Will Crooks, recounted how gruel was served. He said, "When the stuff was put before them the old people began crying quietly and started picking out black specks from the porridge. These specks were caused by rats, which had defecated into the oatmeal as they had the undisturbed run of the oatmeal bin. No attempt was made to cleanse the oatmeal before it was prepared for the old people."

SLIDE 12:

Did the workhouse provide enough food? IN 1845 A SCANDAL erupted when it was discovered that inside the Andover workhouse starving men and boys fought over rotting horse bones that had been sent from the slaughterhouses to be crushed into fertilizer. Workhouse resident, 61-year-old Samuel Green described what happened when fresh bones arrived at the Andover Workhouse:

"We used to tell the fresh bones by the look of them and then we used to be like a parcel of dogs after them; some were not so particular about the bones being fresh as others... I eat it when it was stale and stinking because I was hungered, I suppose." Starvation in a workhouse shows that wholesome food was not provided.

SLIDE 13:

Did the workhouse provide an immediate supply of medical attendance in CASE of illness?

Here we see a workhouse infirmary that seems very well organized and not crowded. Ladies are wrapped in warm clothing and the beds are placed with separations between them. However, this was not often the case. In June 1847 a medical officer for the Northern district of Huddersfield, wrote, "I have seen three individuals lying in their own filth with their hands and faces smeared with it for two days without being washed." These three individuals died within a few days of each other in June.

Matilda Beeton, a workhouse nurse, gave testimony before Parliament regarding the deplorable conditions of the infirmary:

When I went there many of the sick patients were dirty, and their bodies crawling with vermin; one poor old woman, age over 80, was completely alive with them.

The first morning, I attended to the dressing of her legs I found the sores full, and on closer inspection I had to do things to her body too indelicate for me to name...

SHE said of her experience of the workhouse: "On the whole, it did not seem to me that a pauper's life was regarded in ANY other light than the sooner they were dead the better."

SLIDE 14:

This is an illustration of an unfortunate 22 year old man, named Thomas Bingham, who was burned to death in a sulfur cabinet, which workhouse doctors used to treat a skin condition called scabies. The master had put him in there and forgot. He died a few hours later. KILLING ones patrons through medical negligence is the antithesis of providing adequate medical care.

SLIDE 15:

THIS is a satirical illustration of the workhouse. It shows all the horror and indignity people endured, even if some are exaggerated.

On the left, you can see starving people being denied entry and being insulted by the workhouse master who refers to them as "varmits", which means ANIMALS.

In the front of the panel, adults are smashing rope to make something called oakum. Oakum were rope strands used to caulk sailing ships. Shaven head children cry as they use their fingernails to pull apart the compacted, fraying, dirty, rope that was covered in rust, sticky tar and salt. The salt hurt terribly and caused the **tender** finger pads to BLEED continuously. Untreated cuts became infected from the dirt. Picking oakum had very little value and was actually meant as a form of punishment as it was menial, boring and repetitive.

In another panel, people are chained and hung from the ceiling as punishment for infraction of nonsensical workhouse rules. An elderly man PLEADS with the overseer, "Oh sir, have mercy on me, I cannot work so hard for I am old and feeble. Allow me but 10 minutes rest." The overseer is replying, "Rest indeed you lazy old thief, D'ye think you came in here to be a gentleman? Old AND young must labour here – what was the poor made for but to work? Go to the hemp you old rascal."

On the right, a man takes a wagon full of dead babies to the surgeon's office so he can use them for experiments. Victorians were TERRIFIED of having an improper irreligious burial in an unmarked grave, and the idea that their babies were being disposed of like TRASH or used for surgical practice was a direct attack on their dignity and humanity.

SLIDE 16:

Eventually, the idea of work as penalty for being poor became increasingly repellant and inhumane to the British population. Greater understanding of poverty and its complex links with economic conditions (such as low pay and unemployment) gradually began to change the sentiments of those with power in Parliament on how to care for the poor. Poverty was no longer seen as a crime, but a condition to be remedied. As time went by, the goal of workhouses was to rehabilitate with an aim towards independence. Here we see men learning how to do shoemaking. In addition, women were taught how to sew, cook, and other household tasks.

SLIDE 17:

In 1948, the National Assistance Act closed all institutions known as workhouses. Finally people could enjoying some leisure activities, Something that was completely unheard of during the workhouse era. Everyone, including the young and the elderly, were finally allowed to live in dignity through government funding, and enjoy some well deserved rest and recreation.

SLIDE 18:

Many workhouse buildings were turned into museums and can be visited today, so that people can remember the past and learn from it.

The workhouse establishment did not meet its mission statement to provide basic services to the poor. But this was because they were designed with conflicting purposes. Most upper class Britains understood they had to support the populace if they wished to exploit them for military service or labor. However, they didn't truly care about them at all as PEOPLE. Workhouses were built to BARELY sustain but also to demean and **shame** paupers for asking for taxpayer assistance AND to punish them for being poor.

Hopefully governments have learned this lesson from WORKHOUSES: Any SYSTEM that destroys self-respect, callously breaks up the family unit, punishes people instead of helping them, and erodes the basic dignity of the person it is supposed to support, should never be used again. It is both morally reprehensible as well as realistically, unproductive.

SLIDES 19-25:

These slides show my bibliographical research.

SLIDE 26:

ON a final note, I just want to say that studying history creates an ENLIGHTENED society, which forms the basis of a HEALTHLY society.