Hard Times

The Poor and Workhouses

Who cared?

During Queen Victoria’s reign most parents had to work in order to earn enough money to feed themselves and their children. The father and the mother would go to work. The mother would also have to work very hard to look after the children and do all the jobs in the house.

If they worked hard they could perhaps afford to rent a small terraced house.

What was it like for the poorest people in Victorian times?

In the early part of Queen Victoria’s reign poor children would also have gone out to work. Gradually this changed and by the end of Queen Victoria’s reign, children went to the local school.

Some families were much poorer. They lived in small rooms which were often shared by the whole family. Many couldn’t afford new clothes or new furniture. Children had to wear clothes that had been passed from one child to another so their clothes were often too small for them. They often had no shoes.

There were strict rules in the workhouse which everyone had to obey.

Everyone had to wear workhouse clothes and do hard work such as chopping wood or breaking up stones for road building. If they didn’t work hard enough they were punished.

The food was terrible and often it was only a watery porridge called gruel. Everyone had to eat in silence.

The poorest of all families were those that had to live in the workhouse. The workhouse was a place where poor people who could work, worked in return for food and place to sleep. Families were split up so that the men, women and children had to work and sleep in different parts of the workhouse. Those who lived there were known as paupers.

Some mothers and children stayed at home and did work like dressmaking, or taking in other people’s laundry. Without modern washing machines to do the laundry it was hot, steamy, very hard work.

Some of the poorest children lived in the workhouse where they were separated from their parents.

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Charles Dickens was a writer who lived during Queen Victoria's reign. When his father was thrown into a debtors' prison because he couldn't pay his debts, the young Charles Dickens was forced to leave school to work in a factory.

Charles Dickens (1812 – 1870)

When he grew up, this is what Charles Dickens said about his time in the factory....

Charles Dickens tried hard to tell the wealthy about the plight of children during Queen Victoria's reign. One of the ways he tried to get them to understand was by writing stories.

The story was about the lives of poor Victorian children.

When Oliver met another orphan called the Artful Dodger, he learned how to be a pickpocket. In Victorian times many children became pickpockets so that they could buy food.

In the story, Oliver Twist is a boy who was born in a workhouse. His mother died when he was born so he had no one to look after him.

In the story, Oliver Twist is a boy who was born in a workhouse. His mother died when he was nine, he was sent back to the workhouse. The orphans who lived there were starving and Oliver was chosen to be the one who would ask for more gruel. ‘The master turned very pale and gazed in stupefied astonishment that any boy could have the temerity to ask for more!’

The streets were dangerous places. Children who lived on the streets were often called 'Street Arabs.' No one looked after them or fed them. The children huddled together for safety and comfort, slept in doorways and regularly went hungry.

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Fatigued Minstrels by Augustus Edwin Mulready 1883

Some Victorian artists cared about the poor and wanted to tell their story. This painting shows a pair of exhausted young street musicians sleeping against a stone pillar as a well-dressed family and a couple walk along the street opposite the children ignoring them.
Augustus Edwin Mulready (1844 -1904) was an English painter who painted street scenes with urchins and flower-sellers. The word ‘urchins’ meant street children who were homeless and lived on the streets. ‘Vagabonds’ was another word for them.

Here are some of the things that well off Victorians said about the poor. Do you agree with them?

- They waste any money they have on drink and gambling.
- God put people in their place in this life and we must not interfere.
- We saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents on the street. It’s a national disgrace that people live like this.
- They’re filthy, lazy and ignorant and steal anything. Workhouses should be made unpleasant to stop others wanting to go there.

Workhouses - also known as the union, poorhouse, or simply “the house.” Publicly supported institutions to which the sick, destitute, aged, and otherwise impoverished went for food and shelter. After the New Poor Law was passed in 1834 the workhouse became little more than a prison for the poor. Civil liberties were denied, families were separated, and human dignity was destroyed. The meagre diet instituted in the workhouse prompted Dickens to quip that the poor were offered the choice of “being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it.”

Under the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 parishes were grouped into unions and each union had to build a workhouse if they did not already have one.

To understand that ways of life differed greatly across Victorian Society.

To use evidence from Victorian paintings and photographs to suggest how people from the past lived.

To select information from a range of sources and draw conclusions about the Victorian period.

To understand that there are many representations of the Victorian period.

To recognize some similarities and differences between the lives of children from different areas of Victorian society, and answer questions about the period by using at least one source of information.

To understand that the work of individuals can change aspects of society.

To find out about important figures in Victorian times.