

## Living in the Victorian Workhouse

### What Were Workhouses?

Workhouses were large buildings where poor people who had no home or job lived. It was introduced as part of the Poor Laws system, where those who were paupers could live and work. It was intended as a place for people to work themselves out of poverty, though many were seen as prisons for the poor, orphaned children, the sick, disabled, elderly and unmarried mothers.

Living in a workhouse was the last thing people wanted to do. If a man with a wife and children 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 and he could not get a job.

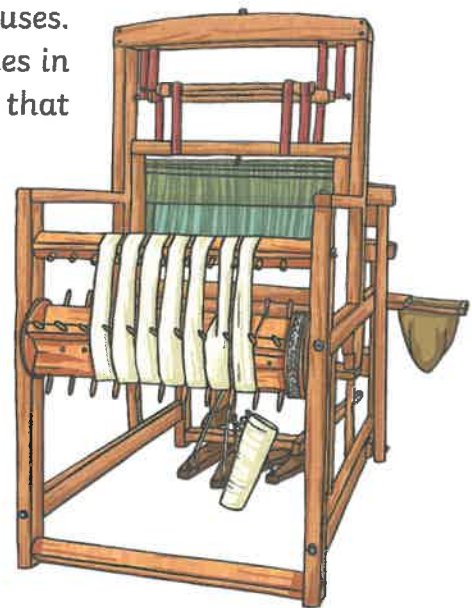
Men, women, and children were housed in different parts of the building and were kept apart as often as possible, even when not working. People were crammed into as small a space as possible, with most people having to share beds. This meant that if someone were to contract a disease, such as ringworm, it would quickly spread throughout the workhouse. This meant that many people fell ill and died due to these conditions.

Children had lessons in reading, writing, maths and religion for around three hours a day. However, in 1836, it was decided that writing was not important for poor children to learn so these lessons were no longer taught in workhouses. Teachers were often cruel and strict. There were rules in place against beating children but there are reports that some were hit with a ruler or stick in class. Girls were taught how to sew, as well as other skills that would help them become a maid when they left the workhouse at fourteen years old.

Food was small portions of plain, simple meals, usually bread, broth, cheese and occasionally meat. Second helpings were strictly forbidden and many people suffered from starvation during their time at the workhouse. It was a common punishment to miss mealtimes if you broke any rules.

### Did You Know...?

Furniture in a workhouse was very basic and uncomfortable; mattresses were often stuffed sacks and most did not have pillows as these were seen as an unnecessary luxury.



### Jobs in the Workhouse

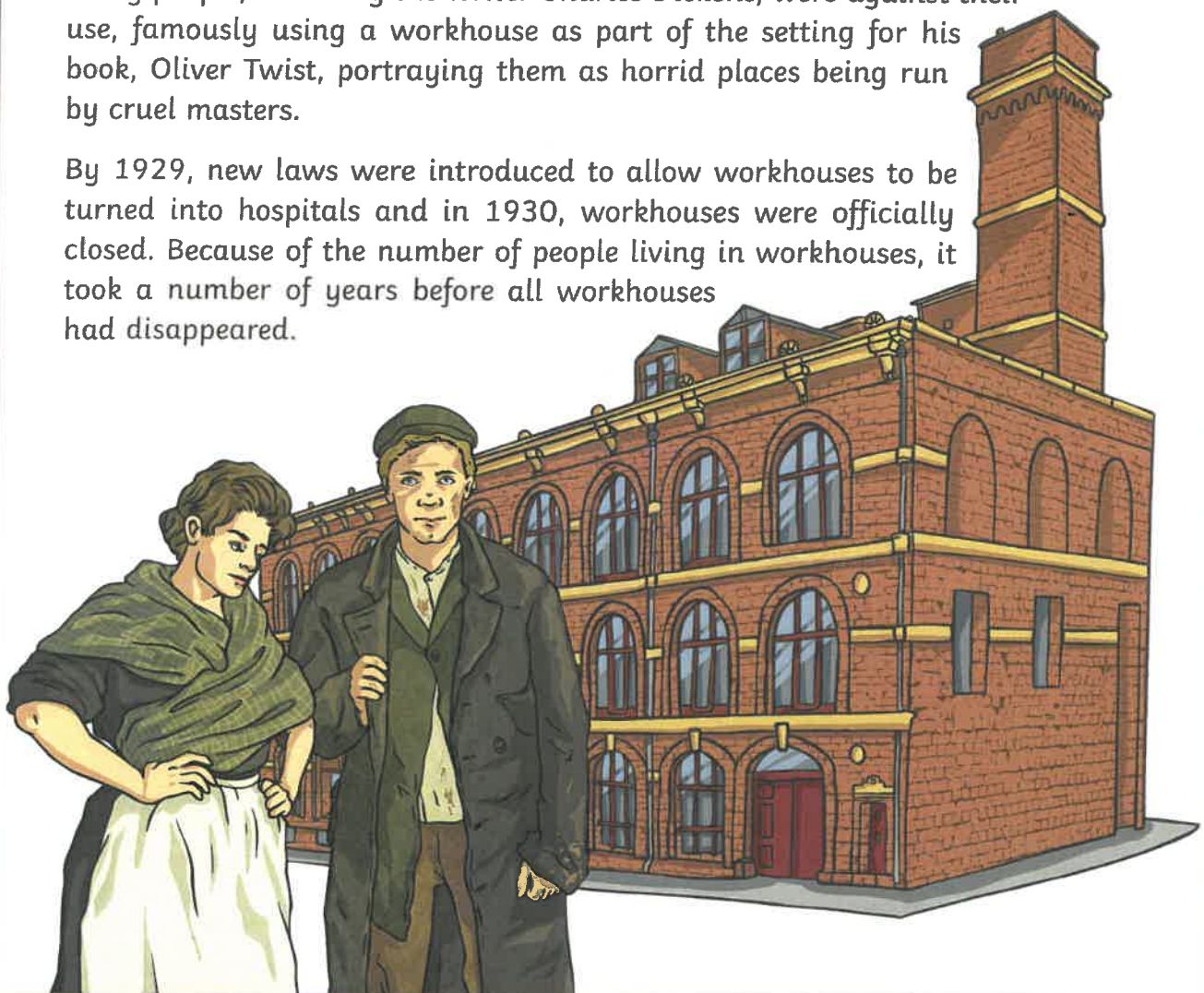
Jobs in the workhouse involved a lot of hard labour. Men were expected to perform exhausting tasks, such as stone breaking, grinding corn and chopping wood. Women were expected to complete domestic work, such as laundry, scrubbing the walls and floors and other general cleaning tasks. Both men and women took part in 'oakum', a task that involved unpicking old ropes for many hours at a time so they could be used on ships.

The working day in the workhouse was long. People would be woken early, around 5 a.m., and aside from prayers and meal times, were expected to work until they were sent to bed around 8 p.m.

### Bad Reputation

Workhouses became known for their terrible conditions and high mortality rate. Many people, including the writer Charles Dickens, were against their use, famously using a workhouse as part of the setting for his book, *Oliver Twist*, portraying them as horrid places being run by cruel masters.

By 1929, new laws were introduced to allow workhouses to be turned into hospitals and in 1930, workhouses were officially closed. Because of the number of people living in workhouses, it took a number of years before all workhouses had disappeared.



# Questions

1. Which of these is closest in meaning to the word **pauper**? Tick **one**.

- rich person  
 poor person  
 friendly  
 cruel

2. Why would a man with a family not want to go to the workhouse?

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3. Fill in the missing words.

Men, women and \_\_\_\_\_ were housed in different \_\_\_\_\_ of the building and were kept \_\_\_\_\_ as often as possible, even when not \_\_\_\_\_.

4. Name **three** subjects boys were taught at the workhouse.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

5. Tick to say whether each job was done by men or women.

Job	Men	Women
Scrubbing the walls and floors		
Working in the fields		
Breaking stones		
Sewing and weaving		

6. Which writer used a workhouse as a setting in one of his books?

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7. Why do you think diseases spread so quickly and easily in workhouses?

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8. What do you think the best and worst aspects of the workhouses were? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

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# Workhouse

a b r e a d g m i c k l  
p n o p q r r n i v w d  
o z a b c o f t g h o p  
v l m n f i e r s r a o  
e x y i r m y d m u g r  
r j n m h r o i p r e p  
t u w t d z t e c d s h  
y h i n k o r n o p e a  
s r u v r x y z a b e n  
a a g y i j k l m n h p  
l g n i b b u r c s c b  
v i c t o r i a n s m n

bread  
cheese  
uniform  
dormitory

laundry  
scrubbing  
pauper  
Victorians

orphan  
arithmetic  
infirm  
poverty