

A decorative rectangular border with ornate, symmetrical flourishes at the corners, framing the title.

The Workhouse

PICKWICK'S SUCCESS GAVE Charles Dickens a loyal following and the confidence to write about his passion for the welfare of the poor.

No matter how many coins he gave to ragamuffin children on the streets of London, their lives could not improve until basic conditions changed for them. Working children were of special concern to Dickens. In his travels as a reporter, he had realized that his life as a bootblack boy had been easy compared to the harsh conditions imposed on armies of children employed in mills and factories all over the country.

Dickens also wanted to call attention to the workhouses. He had painful memories of his mother being faced with the choice of moving herself and the younger children into the workhouse or into John Dickens' small prison cell—and choosing prison because the workhouses were so much worse. They had been a British institution for centuries, and hundreds were scattered throughout the country, housing the elderly,

sickly, disabled, and mentally ill. The many children living in them were usually orphaned or had been abandoned. The workhouses were meant to offer shelter to those who couldn't work—yet inmates were *expected* to work, if at all possible, to offset the cost of their care.

The New Poor Law, passed in 1834—ironically the same year the British colonies abolished slavery—left workhouse inmates little better off than slaves, where they lived in misery and were forced, if they could do any work at all, to labor for their keep. Authorities wanted to be sure that no one went to the workhouse until they had to. Otherwise, they reasoned, the poor might choose the workhouse over work. How could the rich stay rich and get richer if not for the cheap labor of the poor?

Workhouse officials were often corrupt, pocketing whatever they could from the funds paid by the parish for the care of inmates. Well-run workhouses where administrators were honest and inmates were treated well were the exception. Most were so awful that rather than go there, some people committed suicide or took their chances on the streets.

In an essay titled "A Walk in a Workhouse," Dickens wrote, "I walked . . . that Sunday morning through the little world of poverty enclosed within the workhouse walls. It was inhabited by a population of some fifteen-hundred or two thousand paupers, ranging from the infant newly born . . . to the old man dying on his bed." He saw "groves of babies in arms; groves

The Workhouse

of mothers and other sick women in bed; groves of lunatics; jungles of men in stone-paved downstairs day-rooms, waiting for their dinners; long and longer groves of old people, in upstairs infirmary wards, wearing out life, God knows how.”

Dickens was deeply touched by the sight of a child who had just died. The little girl was referred to as “the dropped child” because she had been abandoned on the streets, “dropped” there, presumably by a family member. Dickens

captured the humanity of the ward nurse, herself one of the inmates, who lamented the child, crying, “the dear, the pretty dear!” He added, with a Victorian flourish, “The dropped child seemed too small

and poor a thing for Death to be earnest with, but Death had taken it . . . I heard a voice from Heaven saying, ‘It shall be well for thee, Child.’”

To keep inmates uncomfortable and to constantly remind them of their low status, they were not allowed to have any

Men and women ate separately in workhouses.

These women are eating their sparse rations at London’s Saint Pancras workhouse.



personal possessions. They wore uniforms made from rough, stiff cloth and had their hair cut very short to help prevent lice. The sparse workhouse diet was mainly cheese, potatoes, bread, and an occasional bit of meat. It also included gruel, which was like thin, watery oatmeal. In some workhouses inmates actually got hot tea every day, but fruits, vegetables, sweets, and coffee were the rarest of treats.

Families who entered the workhouse were split up, with men, women, girls, and boys all assigned to separate dormitories. In some workhouses they were forbidden to speak to each other.

Young women who were pregnant and unmarried often ended up in the workhouse because they had nowhere else to go to deliver their babies. Two weeks after giving birth, they had a decision to make: they could either leave with their infants or stay. If they left, they took their chances on the streets. If they stayed, they had to go to work. Their babies were put in the workhouse nursery and cared for by elderly inmates, or sent away to "baby farms"—a form of foster care for infants and toddlers. Either way, children received little care. An observer wrote that the workhouse nursery was "often found under the charge of a person actually certified as of unsound mind, the bottles sour, the babies wet, cold and dirty." In many workhouses, the infant mortality rate was close to one hundred percent.

Still, children made up a third to half of the workhouse

The Workhouse

population. Many impoverished mothers who could not feed their children had to put them there. Other child inmates were orphans or had been abandoned. They were given a bit of schooling and then put to work. Both boys and girls went into the factories or mills or did other kinds of hard labor. Others were hired out to farmers or shopkeepers. Some boys became chimney sweeps. Girls were often hired out to do menial chores in the homes of the middle class—like the workhouse girl who lived with Dickens' family for several years. It's possible Dickens learned enough from her about the workhouse to know that his mother made the right decision to move into the Marshalsea Prison.

Emmeline Pankhurst, famous in England for helping women get the right to vote, wrote of visiting a workhouse: "I was horrified to see little girls seven and eight years old on their knees scrubbing the cold stones of the long corridors. These little girls were clad, summer and winter, in thin cotton frocks, low in the neck and short sleeved. . . . The fact that



Elderly women were often the caregivers for small children whose impoverished mothers had to work. In the workhouse system, the majority of these children died.

bronchitis was epidemic among them most of the time had not suggested to the guardians any change in the fashion of their clothes.”

Dickens bristled at the injustice of the system. A story in the news at that time reported an inquiry into the deaths of a number of workhouse children. How could anyone—even someone who thought that the poor deserved to be poor—be indifferent to that? And yet people were.

He was thinking about writing a series of articles about the poor, but when he created a fictional sketch about a boy he called *Oliver Twist*, he saw the story’s possibilities and began a novel. He wrote at white heat, spilling words onto paper, employing the elements of melodrama and pathos that were popular at the time. All through the story he exposed the injustices and harshness of the English class system on the poor—especially on children—and the indifference of the rich to their plight. He did not hold back in revealing the dark side of life: abuse of children, betrayal, murder, corruption, and filth figured in to his novel’s complicated plot. He was determined to make the story so compelling that even if people found it distasteful, they would read it anyway. Dickens knew what it was like to have someone else controlling your life, and to be impoverished, miserable, and hungry. Through his main character, readers would know as well.

And who was *Oliver Twist*?

The lowest of the low: a workhouse orphan.