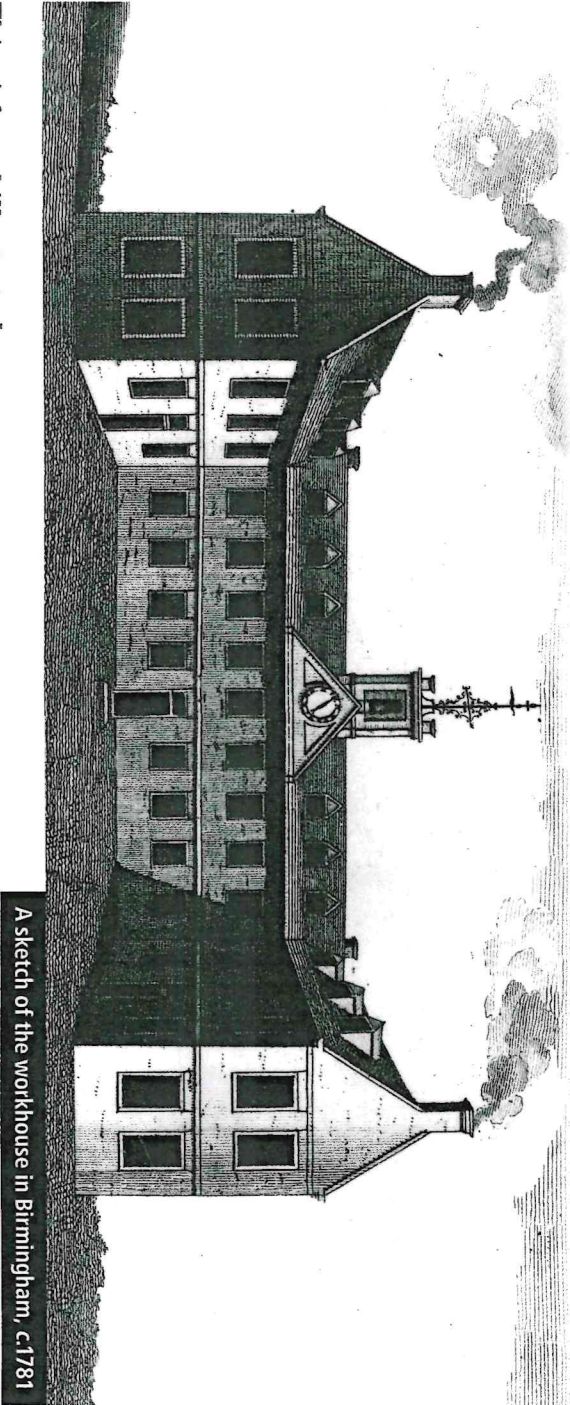


# The Workhouses website



A sketch of the workhouse in Birmingham, c.1781

This rich and illustrated resource ([www.workhouses.org.uk](http://www.workhouses.org.uk)) charts the history of the Poor Law, focusing on the locations, intentions and residents of workhouses in England and Wales

This website is a fascinating and valuable resource for candidates studying the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act (PLAA) and the beginnings of the welfare state in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England and Wales. (Short sections also outline provision for the poor in Scotland and Ireland.) The author, Peter Higginbotham (see Box 1), explains the history of the Poor Law in England and Wales, including the full texts of the major acts.

## Indoor poor relief

From 1601, under the Old Poor Law in England and Wales, parish overseers were obliged to collect a poor rate to support the poor by providing work for the able-bodied or care for the disabled. In practice most overseers made small cash payments, known as 'outdoor relief', to the poor in their own homes. Some parishes and towns built workhouses for the provision of 'indoor relief'.

The site is an in-depth study of indoor relief in workhouses from 1600–1929. It does not explore the practice of outdoor relief before or after 1834. Numerous plans and 6,000 photos and illustrations, a glossary of all specialist terms and a bibliography for individual sections are included.

## Box | Peter Higginbotham, website author

- Family historian
- Author of many books and articles
- Contributor to TV and radio programmes including: *Who do you think you are?*, *Making history* and *tracing your roots* and Britain's oldest family businesses

## The PLAA

The 'Introduction' section explains that by the early nineteenth century several changes had resulted in huge rises in poor rates:

- increased population
- lack of employment, especially in southern and eastern England
- problems of food supply and scarcity during the French Wars, 1793–1815
- the allowance system

This in turn prompted demand for reform. The 'Captain Swing' rural riots of 1830 were the final straw. Most contemporaries had little understanding of these causes of poverty and believed the poor were lazy.

The PLAA of 1834 — promoted by Edwin Chadwick, civil servant and researcher into Poor Law, factories and later public health — established the New Poor Law. It was one of the most important legislative acts of the nineteenth century and part of the Whig Reforms, 1830–41. Three national Poor Law commissioners, based at Somerset House in London, advised boards of guardians, who ran the new unions of parishes, each of which built a workhouse.

## Workhouses

The workhouse was the key element of the PLAA. All outdoor relief for the able-bodied was supposed to be abolished. The union workhouse was therefore, in theory, the only place where an able-bodied pauper could obtain relief. Workhouses under the 1834 Act were substantial and imposing buildings such as the new one in Southwell. Ironically, as the site notes, in the twentieth century some of the workhouses, for example Oram's Arbour in Winchester, were converted into luxury flats.

At the time, the government sought to use workhouses as a deterrent to discourage poor people from seeking relief. Conditions in the workhouses (explore the 'Workhouse life' sections of the site),

were designed to be less congenial than those experienced outside by the poorest agricultural labourers.

Workhouses before 1834

## City of London Corporation

This experimental workhouse on Bishopsgate Street in the City of London opened in 1698 to fulfil two functions of the Old Poor Law:

- provide work for the unemployed, including orphaned children
- incarcerate vagrants and unruly persons who would not work

[www.workhouses.org.uk/CityOfLondon/corporation](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/CityOfLondon/corporation)

## Chichester

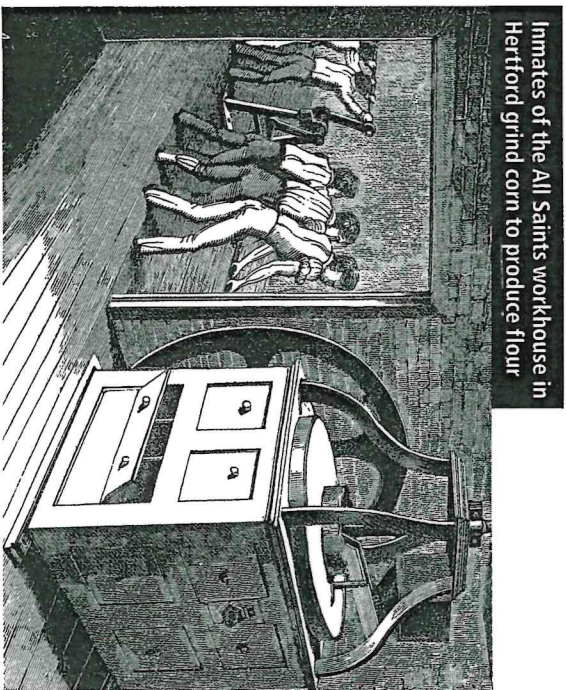
This urban workhouse cared for adults and children from 1753. On arrival, inmates were cleansed and the children's heads shaved. Strict rules applied, including walking in a crocodile to church on Sunday.

[www.workhouses.org.uk/Chichester](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Chichester)

## Gilbert Unions, 1782

Thomas Gilbert's Act of 1782 allowed parishes to combine into unions to build workhouses administered by boards of guardians. Gilbert was an MP, land agent and Poor Law reformer. These workhouses were designed to provide accommodation and work, often in attached farms and gardens, for the non-able-bodied poor, rather than punishment. Over 100 of these workhouses were built. In Hampshire, one such workhouse was erected at Gosport and Alverstoke especially to cater for the families of military based in Portsmouth.

One very important Gilbert workhouse was for the Southwell union in Nottinghamshire ([www.workhouses.org.uk/Southwell](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Southwell)). The site explains that this union abolished outdoor relief in 1823 and established an economically run workhouse which cut the cost of poor rates. The project was established by magistrate Reverend J. Becher and retired sea captain George Nicholls, and provided a model for the later union workhouses after the 1834 Act. The plan for the workhouse was based on prison designs and included a central hub from which all inmates could be watched. This building is now the property of the National Trust and open to the public. It can also be visited virtually at [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/workhouse-southwell](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/workhouse-southwell).



Inmates of the All Saints workhouse in Hertford grind corn to produce flour

## Activities

- Use the interactive map facility to locate any workhouses in your area.
- A major question about the 1834 PLAA is to what extent it caused a sea change. Explore how widespread workhouses were before 1834. Compare and contrast the nature of workhouses before and after 1834 to determine how innovative this aspect of the New Poor Law was. For example, study the sections on workhouse locations, rules, staff and administration, actual buildings and the use of gardens.
- Browse the section on 'Arts and literature' to appreciate how the workhouse featured in popular culture and literature.
- One hundred years after the event, explore of the impact of the First World War on the workhouse system.

## New union workhouses, 1834–1929

How bad was life in the new union workhouses, often nicknamed 'Bastilles'? Explore workhouse life, especially uniform, food, rules, and the Andover scandal: [www.workhouses.org.uk/Andover](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Andover). The website also indicates how union workhouses evolved. Look for changes in management of the New Poor Law at national level, for example in 1847 and 1871. Study the sections on education and, under the 'Working life' menu, medical care and changing times.

## Tramps and vagrants

The Old and the New Poor Law provided for people resident in a parish. Anyone outside this system was subject to vagrancy law before 1834. Such travelling poor or vagrants included those in search of work, discharged soldiers and sailors and their families, unlicensed entertainers and pedlars.

The website contains plenty of detail on this group under the 'Tramps and vagrants' menu. From 1700 the cost of supplying them with emergency care fell on the counties. The 1834 Act made no provision for these homeless poor. However from 1837, after some vagrants had died after being turned away by workhouses, vagrants were offered very basic accommodation in a workhouse outbuilding without any formal admission procedures, in return for a day's work, perhaps stone-breaking. This provision evolved into the casual ward, depicted in Victorian social realist art by Luke Fildes.

## Limitations and strengths of the website

The website gives a partial view of provision for the poor. Remember that outdoor relief — which remained the main form of support for the poor before and after 1834 — is not considered. Despite the intentions of the Whig government, 80% of paupers continued to receive this relief after 1834, largely because workhouses were completely unsuitable for the economic cycles in northern industrial towns.

For workhouses, the site is very comprehensive and represents 15 years of research by Higginbotham. Explore its fascinating detail by theme, historical period or county.

Jean Morrin is a visiting research fellow in history, as well as volunteer coordinator and researcher for the New Victoria County History of Hampshire.