

Poverty: Activity - How the Poor Lived

TEACHERS' NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Understand what life was like for the poor in Victorian times
- Understand the differences between life for poorer families in Victorian times and families in general today
- Develop children's research skills using historical sources, in particular photographs and written texts, to learn about how poor Victorians lived

Cross-curricular links

- Literacy

Sources



Source 1. Cook's Row, Worthing, 1894



Source 2. East Preston Workhouse



Source 3. 'Dietary Table of Children...and able-bodied men and women' in East Preston Union [workhouse], Statement of the Union Accounts, 1870



Source 4a. Extract from 'Glimpses of Old Worthing' by Henfrey Smail, describing bad housing conditions in Worthing in the 1850s



Source 4b. Audio version of Source 4a



Source 5a. Extracts from the Board of Health Inquiry into Sewerage, Drainage, Supply of Water, and Sanitary Conditions in Worthing, 1850



Source 5b. Audio version of Source 5a



Source 6. Summerhouse in the Goodwood Estate, 1899

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Source 1

By the later 19th century, Cook's Row in Worthing was an area of slum housing. Shown in 1894, it was demolished and rebuilt as Chatsworth Road in 1903. The houses are small and crammed together, with no gardens. They have small windows, and there is only one street light. The road is muddy, with puddles. These houses were badly ventilated, quite dark inside, and would probably have been damp. The poor would have lived there.

Source 2

East Preston Workhouse was built c1834 and demolished in 1970. Like other workhouses throughout the UK, it was deliberately intimidating - large, built of brick, and with little decoration.

Workhouses provided housing and basic food for the very poor, in return for which they had to work - sometimes as much as ten hours a day. Men, women and children were allocated separate dormitories and living areas, resulting in the splitting up of families.

Source 3

This dietary table comes from the 1870 Statement of Accounts for the East Preston Union [workhouse], compiled by Robert French, Clerk to the Guardians. Except for the size of the portions, the food is basically the same for adults and children: bread and butter and gruel (thin watery porridge) for breakfast; meat pudding, suet pudding or beef with vegetables, bread and cheese, or broth for dinner; and bread, cheese and milk at suppertime. Beer was sometimes given to the adults - but only 'at the discretion of the master'.

Although this diet appears basic and unappetising, there is still debate about how better or worse this would have been than the food eaten by poor families outside the workhouse.

The Poor Law Amendment Act, 1834

This Act decreed that the poor would only be given food and shelter if they came to live in a workhouse. Conditions were deliberately harsh and the diet was very basic - life was meant to be much tougher inside the workhouse than outside, to deter the able-bodied poor from applying for relief. Inmates who were well enough were given hard work such as stone-breaking or picking apart old ropes called oakum. Children who entered the workhouse would receive some basic schooling, but were allowed only limited contact with their parents - perhaps for an hour or so a week on Sunday afternoon.

Source 4a and 4b

The poor who lived in towns and cities in the early Victorian period usually lived in bad and unhealthy accommodation. Source 4 gives an account of the living conditions of the poor in Worthing in the 1850s.

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Houses and streets were not properly drained, sewers were exposed and cesspools were left open to infect the air. Disease was a growing problem. Houses were not properly built and were made from inferior materials. These streets are compared by Snewin to the slums described by Dickens in his novels - smelly, dark, dirty and cramped.

Source 5

The living conditions of the British poor were much discussed in the Houses of Parliament, and the Health of Towns Act was passed in 1848 in order to improve the general health of the population. This Act provided for the setting up of local Boards of Health to create healthier towns by improving sanitation and providing cleaner water in towns (as it was not very safe to drink before the Act).

These extracts from a long report to the General Board of Health detail some of the problems with bad sewerage, health and water conditions that were found in Worthing. These problems were generalised in many towns and cities in the 1850s, and particularly affected the poor:

- Sewage on the beach, causing a bad smell (p.12)
- Poor state of roads (p.14)
- Poor house construction, flooding and damp (p.22)
- Overcrowding, lack of ventilation, poor drainage, and dirt leading to sickness and poor health, and a high death rate (p.25)
- Lack of proper toilets in some houses, and poorly functioning water closets in others (p.29)

Illnesses that were common in Victorian times, especially in overcrowded and unsanitary areas, included: fever (scarlet and typhoid), influenza, cough, cold, measles, bronchitis, pneumonia, chicken pox, cholera.

Living conditions for the poor improved markedly by the end of the 19th Century. Epidemics had largely been eliminated by 1901, the Worthing typhoid epidemic of 1893 being an unusual case which made national headlines.

Source 6

This stone building in the grounds of Goodwood House was known as Carne's or Carney's Seat. Elaborately decorated in classical style, it was used by the family and their guests for social gatherings, usually in summertime. Note the two well-dressed ladies with parasols relaxing on the grass.

The size, solid construction and decoration of this summerhouse are very different from the housing for poor families shown in Source 1.