

Poor Law amendment 1834

Before the Amendment

The earliest medieval Poor Law was the Ordinance of Labourers which was issued by King Edward III in 1349, and & 1350. The ordinance was issued in response to the outbreak of the Black Death 1348–1350 when an estimated 30–40% of the population had died.

The decline in population left surviving workers in great demand in the agricultural economy of Britain. Landowners had to face the choice of raising wages to compete for workers or letting their lands go unused. Wages for labourers rose, and this forced up prices across the economy as goods became more expensive to produce.

An attempt to rein in prices, the ordinance required that everyone who could work did; (Sounds a bit like Universal credit!) that wages were kept at pre-plague levels and that food was not overpriced. Workers saw these shortage conditions as an opportunity to flee employers and become freemen, so Edward III passed additional laws to punish escaped workers.

In 1495, Parliament passed the Vagabonds and Beggars Act ordering that "vagabonds, idle and suspected persons shall be set in the stocks for three days and three nights and have none other sustenance but bread and water and then shall be put out of Town. Every beggar suitable to work shall resort to the Hundred (area) where he last dwelled, is best known, or was born and there remain upon the pain of this punishment." Although this returned the burden of caring for the jobless to the communities producing more children than they could employ, it offered no immediate remedy to the problem of poverty; it was merely swept from sight, or moved from town to town. Moreover, no distinction was made between vagrants and the jobless; both were simply categorised as "sturdy beggars", to be punished and moved on.

In the early 1580s, with the development of English colonization schemes, initially in Ireland and later in North America, a new method to alleviate the condition of the poor was suggested and utilized considerably over time. By 1619 Virginia's system of indentured service would be fully developed, and subsequent colonies would adopt the method with modifications - As discussed when we studied slavery etc. Napoleonic War

During the Napoleonic Wars it became difficult to import cheap grain into Britain which resulted in the price of bread increasing. As wages did not also increase, many agricultural labourers were plunged into poverty. Following peace in 1814, the Tory government of Lord Liverpool passed the Corn Laws to keep the price of grain artificially high. 1815 saw great social unrest as the end of the French Wars saw industrial and agricultural depression and high unemployment. Social attitudes to poverty began to change after 1815 and overhauls of the system were considered. The Poor Law system was criticized as distorting the free market and in 1816 a Parliamentary Select Committee looked into altering the system which resulted in the Sturges-Bourne Acts being passed which allowed for parish relief to be raised from ratepayers (middle & upper class householders). 1817 also saw the passing of the Poor Employment Act, *"to authorise the issue of Exchequer Bills and the Advance of Money out of the Consolidated Fund, to a limited Amount, for the*

carrying on of Public Works and Fisheries in the United Kingdom and Employment of the Poor in Great Britain". (do you remember the Manpower Services Commission works which did just this – eg Basingstoke canal)

By 1820, workhouses were already being built to reduce the spiralling cost of poor relief. There were several possible reasons for the gradual increase in relief given to able-bodied males, including the enclosure movement (which enclosed common land & stopped pasture & pannage (releasing livestock into forests to eat acorns etc – still allowed in New Forest) for peasants) and a decline in industries such as wool spinning and lace making. Also farmers were able to take advantage of the poor law system to shift some of their labour costs onto the tax payer.

The cost of looking after the poor was growing more expensive every year. This cost was paid for by the middle and upper classes in each town through their local taxes. There was a real suspicion amongst them that they were paying the poor to be lazy and avoid work.

Build-up to the Amendment

The [1832 Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws](#) was set up following problems with unemployed poor people & the widespread destruction and machine breaking of the [Swing Riots](#) (protest at agricultural mechanisation eg threshing machines and harsh working conditions.) .

The Royal Commission's primary concerns were:

1. The fear that population growth is exponential while food production is linear – thus causing poverty & many unemployed people;
2. The fear that the practices of the Old Poor Law were undermining the position of the independent labourer.

Two practices were of particular concern:

The "roundsman" system, where overseers hired out paupers as cheap labour, and the Speenhamland system, which subsidised low wages (with subsidy rates up or down depending on the price of bread) which put more onus on parishes rather than employers for the welfare (minimal though this was) of workers. (*This made me think of the index linked pay rises in the 1970s*)

The commissioners sent out questionnaires and visited over 3,000 parishes (out of a total of 15,000) collecting information

The report concluded that the existing Poor Laws undermined the prosperity of the country by interfering with the natural laws of supply and demand, that the existing means of poor relief allowed employers to force down wages, and, that poverty itself was inevitable.

The Commission proposed the New Law be governed by two overarching principles:

- "less eligibility": that the pauper should have to enter a workhouse with conditions worse than that of the poorest free labourer outside of the workhouse.
- the "workhouse test", that relief should only be available in the workhouse. The reformed workhouses were to be uninviting, so that anyone capable of coping outside them would choose not to be in one.

Outdoor relief - the financial support formerly given to the able-bodied living in the parish outside the workhouse - was no longer to be available to them so as to compel them to work. Outside assistance was widely available to the sick and

elderly. But in many areas assistance was only given within the confines of the workhouse where the regime was deliberately harsh and often cruel.

The [Poor Law Commission](#) took a year to write its report.

Reform

The Poor Law Amendment Act was quickly passed by Parliament in 1834, with separate legislation for Scotland and Ireland. It implemented a major overhaul of the old Poor Law by adopting all the commission's main recommendations. A 'Poor Law Commission' (a new government department, in effect) was set up in London employing inspectors to supervise the work of local officials. Instead of an administrative system based around parishes about 600 poor law unions This was an early local government unit. The duties were performed by the board of guardians, partly elected by ratepayers, but also including [magistrates](#). Including the building of workhouses in each union for the giving of poor relief. Although the aim of the legislation was to reduce costs to rate payers

A Pioneering Act

The new Act was pioneering in introducing a role for central government in the care of the poor, and remained in force throughout the Victorian age. But, as social commentators remarked, the treatment of genuine hardship caused by economic circumstances beyond the control of the individual had been ignored.

When the Act was introduced however it had been partly watered down. The workhouse test and the idea of "less eligibility" were never mentioned themselves and the recommendation of the Royal Commission that outdoor relief should be abolished – was never implemented. The report recommended separate workhouses for the aged, infirm, children, able-bodied females and able-bodied males.

Outcomes of the Act

The New Poor Law is considered to be one of the most "far-reaching pieces of legislation of the entire Nineteenth Century" and a "classic example of the fundamental [Whig](#) reforming legislation of the period" The Act aimed to reduce the burden on rate payers and can be seen as an attempt by the Whig government to win the votes of the classes enfranchised by the [Great Reform Act](#) 1832. Despite being labelled an "amendment act" it completely overhauled the existing system. One area not reformed was the method of financing of the Poor Law system which continued to be paid for by levying a "poor rate" on the property owning middle classes.

Although the Poor Law Amendment Act did not ban all forms of outdoor relief, it stated that no able-bodied person was to receive money or other help from the Poor Law authorities except in a workhouse. Conditions in workhouses were to be made harsh to discourage people from claiming. Workhouses were to be built in every poor law union area.

For various reasons it was impossible to apply some of the terms of the Act. Less eligibility was in some cases impossible without starving paupers and the high cost of building workhouses incurred by rate payers meant that outdoor relief continued to be a popular alternative. Despite efforts to ban outdoor relief, parishes continued to offer it as a more cost-effective method of dealing with pauperism. The [Outdoor Labour Test Order](#) 1842 and

Outdoor Relief Prohibitory Order 1844 were both issued to try to prevent people receiving relief outside of the workhouse.

When the 1834 Amendment was applied to the industrial North of England (an area the law had never considered during reviews), the system failed catastrophically as many found themselves temporarily unemployed, due to recessions or a fall in stock demands, so-called 'cyclical unemployment' and were reluctant to enter a Workhouse, despite its being the only method of gaining aid. Nottingham also was allowed an exemption from the law and continued to provide outdoor relief

The abuses and shortcomings of the system are documented in the novels of Charles Dickens eg *Oliver Twist*, and Frances Trollope and later in *People of the Abyss* by Jack London. Despite the aspirations of the reformers, the New Poor Law was unable to make the Workhouse as bad as life outside. The primary problem was that in order to make the diet of the Workhouse inmates "less eligible" than what they could expect outside, it would be necessary to starve the inmates beyond an acceptable level. It was for this reason that other ways were found to deter entrance to the Workhouses. These measures ranged from the introduction of prison-style uniforms to the segregation of 'inmates' into yards – there were normally male, female, boys' and girls' yards. Inmates, male and female, young and old were made to work hard, often doing unpleasant jobs such as picking oakum (a fibrous material used in shipbuilding, picked out strand-by-strand from old rope) or breaking stones. Children could also find themselves hired out to work in factories or mines.

In 1846, the Andover workhouse scandal where conditions in the Andover Union Workhouse were found to be inhumane and dangerous, prompted a government review and in 1847 the abolition of the Poor Law Commission which was replaced with a Poor Law Board which meant that a Committee of Parliament was to administer the Poor Law, with a cabinet minister as head. Despite this another scandal occurred over inhumane treatment of paupers in the Huddersfield workhouse.

The Workhouse Visiting Society which formed in 1858 highlighted conditions in workhouses and led to workhouses being inspected more often. Most boards of guardians were middle class and committed to keeping poor rates as low as possible. After the Reform Act 1867 there was increasing welfare legislation. As this legislation required local authorities' support of the Poor Law Board was replaced with a Local Government Board in 1871. The Local Government Board led a crusade against outdoor relief supported by the Charity Organisation Society, an organization which viewed outdoor relief as destroying the self-reliance of the poor. The effect of this renewed effort to deter outdoor relief was to reduce claimants by a third and to increase numbers in the work house by 12–15%.

By the 1880s, greater understanding of poverty and its complex links with economic conditions (such as low pay and unemployment) slowly began to change opinion in Parliament. County Councils were formed in 1888, District Councils in 1894. This meant that public housing, unlike health and income maintenance, developed outside the scope of the Poor Law.