

Victorian Workhouses



Soot tells Stella how he was abandoned as a baby and grew up in a workhouse. This was the fate of many poor people in Victorian times, adults as well as children. Introduced in 1834, the workhouse provided a place to live, a place to work and earn money, food, clothing, free medical care (people had to pay to see doctors in Victorian times) and education. They were huge buildings providing everything onsite – dormitories, kitchens, dining hall, laundry, school rooms, nurseries, a sick bay, chapel as well as a vegetable garden and often a small farm. But workhouses were feared. The conditions and harsh regimes made life inside was similar to that in a prison. Men, women and children had different living and working areas so families were split up. Often they were punished if they even tried to speak to one another. The work was hard: for example ‘picking oakum’, which involved untwisting the strands of old ropes and unrolling the individual strands so they could be used again.



Workhouse women picking oakum – National Archives

The food was tasteless and often the same every day – such delights as: ‘Pease pudding’ (made from boiled split peas) ‘Hasty pudding’ (a type of thin custard made by boiling up milk, flour and oatmeal) and ‘Gruel’ (thin oatmeal porridge). None of it was very nutritious. The education children received was usually very poor and often did not include reading and writing, key skills for getting a good job. Punishments were very harsh. As Soot says: *‘The old man who run the workhouse used to thrash all us boys with his belt – even when we ‘aint done ‘nuffink’*. Children were seen as expendable and were often sold to owners of mines or factories where they would be put to work.

The famous author Charles Dickens realistically portrayed the cold reality of life in a workhouse in his novel ‘Oliver Twist’ and its publication did much to bring the suffering of the poor to the attention of Victorian society. It is no wonder that Soot ran away.

Exercise 1

The document below shows the daily routine for children in a Victorian workhouse.

Hours.	Minutes.	From the 1st of April to the 1st of October.
6	—	To rise at the ringing of the Bell.
"	10	Prayer.
"	15	In the Lavatory.
"	45	General muster and examination as to cleanliness.
7	—	School Lessons.
"	50	Muster at the sound of the Bugle.
8	—	Enter to Breakfast.
"	20	Return to Play-grounds or Employments.
9	15	Muster at the Sound of the Bugle for School.
"	30	School to commence.
12	30	" to cease.
"	50	Muster at the sound of the Bugle.
1	—	Enter to Dinner.
"	30	Return to Play-grounds or Employments.
2	15	Muster at the sound of the Bugle for School.
"	30	School to commence.
5	30	" to cease.
"	50	Muster at the sound of the Bugle.
6	—	Enter to Supper.
"	20	Return to play or Employments.
8	—	Muster in the Lavatory.
"	35	Enter Dormitories.
"	40	Prayer.
"	50	All in Bed.
Variations from the 1st of October to the 1st of April.		
7	—	To rise.
"	10	Prayer.
"	45	General muster and examination as to cleanliness.
"	50	Muster at the sound of the Bugle.
8	—	Breakfast.
7 to 8	P.M.	School Lessons.

NOTE.—*Practice for Singing.*—On Thursdays and Fridays from $\frac{1}{4}$ past 2 to $\frac{1}{4}$ past 3 P.M., and on Saturdays from $\frac{1}{4}$ past 11 to $\frac{1}{4}$ past 12 A.M.

Practice for Band.—On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, from $\frac{1}{4}$ past 2 to $\frac{1}{4}$ past 5 P.M., and on Thursday and Friday from $\frac{1}{4}$ past 3 to $\frac{1}{4}$ past 5 P.M.

The *Half-holiday* of the Children to be on Wednesday afternoon.

Imagine you are a Victorian pauper living in the workhouse. Write a diary entry for your day following this routine. Include details of some of the following:

How many others are there in your dormitory? What temperature was the water you had to wash in? What did you have for breakfast? What were you learning in your lessons? What did the teacher do to keep order? What job were you assigned to do in the afternoon? What did you have for dinner? Were you involved in the singing or band practice? What do you dream your life will be like in the future?

Exercise 2

- Imagine the whole class are a group of Victorian children living in a workhouse, who, like Soot, cannot tolerate it further.
- In groups of four or five, devise a plan to escape.
- Act out your plan to demonstrate how it can work
- Each group takes it in turns to present their plan to the rest of the class
- Vote on which plan would be the most likely to succeed.
- If the plan worked and you managed to escape, how would you survive in the outside world?
- Would it be best to stick together or go it alone?



Oliver Twist asks for more