

## **The workhouse in Victorian England: an appreciation**

This paper provides a synthesis and overview of recent work on the Victorian English workhouse. It draws on many local studies of individual workhouses in English counties including Hampshire, Kent, Hertfordshire, Lancashire; and studies of the different functions performed by the workhouse.

The central theme of the paper is that the widespread perception of the workhouse as the forbidding external face of a harsh and unforgiving social and economic policy is too simplistic. While there is no doubt that the creation of a nationwide system of workhouses marked an assault by the establishment on the 'able-bodied poor', the operation of the workhouse system in practice was complicated, and workhouses fulfilled many functions, some of which were beneficial even to the poor they were supposed to deter.

The paper explores several sub-themes.

(1) The origins of the workhouse system in the years leading up to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.

(2) The operation of the 'workhouse test' in practice. The workhouse test was designed to deter able-bodied men from applying for poor relief by forcing able-bodied men who wished to receive relief to enter the workhouse. In practice, it is clear that married able-bodied men with families were not admitted to workhouses except as a last resort (because if such a man were to be admitted, his family would have to accompany him, and this was very expensive for the poor law authorities). For unmarried men, by contrast, the workhouse test appears to have worked almost perfectly, as they were deterred from even applying for poor relief.

(3) Who ended up in the workhouses? Workhouse populations in much of England were dominated by orphan children, the aged poor (especially males) and unmarried mothers. These were groups of people for whom the alternatives were worse, for whom the workhouse test failed. By contrast, single men, married men with families, and aged females with offspring and grandchildren living close by did not enter workhouses, as better opportunities outside either existed, or were created by the operation of the poor law.

(4) The agency of the poor. The poor were not passive recipients of benefits. They could (and did) exploit the operation of the system for their own advantage. Examples include the use of workhouse lying-in facilities by unmarried mothers, and economic pressure being put on poor law authorities by individual paupers (and groups of paupers). Admission to the workhouse was expensive for the poor law authorities, and the poor knew this.

(5) Functions of the workhouses. Workhouses performed many functions: they were partly childrens' homes, isolation hospitals, asylums, and eventually old people's homes. Some of these functions were provided by no other institutions, and formed a vital safety net not just for the poor, but for the whole of the communities within which they lay.