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1834 Poor Law

What did people think of the new Poor Law?



Key Stages 1-3 | Empire and Industry 1750-1850

Lesson pack

Introduction

In 1834 a new Poor Law was introduced. Some people welcomed it because they believed it would:

- reduce the cost of looking after the poor
- take beggars off the streets
- encourage poor people to work hard to support themselves

The new Poor Law ensured that the poor were housed in workhouses, clothed and fed. Children who entered the workhouse would receive some schooling. In return for this care, all workhouse paupers would have to work for several hours each day.

However, not all Victorians shared this point of view. Some people, such as Richard Oastler, spoke out against the new Poor Law, calling the workhouses 'Prisons for the Poor'. The poor themselves hated and feared the threat of the workhouse so much that there were riots in northern towns. Use this lesson to find out how some people felt about the new Poor Law of 1834.

Suitable for:

KS 1 - 3

Time period:

Empire and Industry 1750-

Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 1:

Events beyond living memory that are significant nationally

Key stage 2:

Changes in an aspect of social history; a significant turning point in British history

Key stage 3

Ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745-1901: party politics, extension of the franchise and social reform.

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Teacher's Notes

The poster in this lesson is an excellent piece of evidence showing opposition to the new Poor Law and public conceptions of life inside the workhouses. One way of encouraging pupils to analyse this rich source is by helping them to see that the poster is really made up of smaller pictures. By dealing with one small picture at a time, commenting on and analysing the poster can become more manageable.

To extend their work, pupils can create their own new Poor Law poster, either for or against the law. Or they can be asked to write to the government complaining about the harshness of the new Poor Law. They could also work in groups to create an alternative plan to deal with the problem of the rising cost of looking after the poor.

The lesson can also be used as a starting point for investigating the new Poor Law in more depth and discussing attitudes to the poor in 19th century Britain.

Sources

Source 1 : HO 44/27/2

Background

Before 1834, 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 the middle and upper classes that they were paying the poor to be lazy and avoid work.

After years of complaint, a new Poor Law was introduced in 1834. The new Poor Law was meant to reduce the cost of looking after the poor and impose a system which would be the same all over the country.

Under the new Poor Law, parishes were grouped into unions and each union had to build a workhouse if they did not already have one. Except in special circumstances, poor people could now only get help if they were prepared to leave their homes and go into a workhouse.

Conditions inside the workhouse were deliberately harsh, so that only those who desperately needed help would ask for it. Families were split up and housed in different parts of the workhouse. The poor were made to wear a uniform and the diet was monotonous. There were also strict rules and regulations to follow. Inmates, male and female, young and old were made to work hard, often doing unpleasant jobs such as picking oakum or breaking stones. Children could also find themselves hired out to work in factories or mines.

Shortly after the new Poor Law was introduced, a number of scandals hit the headlines. The most famous was Andover Workhouse, where it was reported that half-starved inmates were found eating the rotting flesh from bones. In response to these scandals the government introduced stricter rules for those who ran the workhouses and they also set up a system of regular inspections. However, inmates were still at the mercy of unscrupulous masters and matrons who treated the poor with contempt and abused the rules.

Although most people did not have to go to the workhouse, it was always threatening if a worker became unemployed, sick or old. Increasingly, workhouses contained only orphans,

Background

the old, the sick and the insane. Not surprisingly the new Poor Law was very unpopular. It seemed to punish people who were poor through no fault of their own.

External links

[The Workhouse](#)¹

The Workhouse often conjures up the grim world of Oliver Twist, but its story is a fascinating mix of social history, politics, economics and architecture.

[British Library: Oliver Twist and the workhouse](#)²

Find out about Oliver Twist and the workhouse.

¹ <https://www.workhouses.org.uk/>

² <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/oliver-twist-and-the-workhouse>

Tasks

1. Click on this extract from an anti-Poor Law Poster drawn in 1837.

- How desperate are the people trying to get into the workhouse?
- What is the response of the workhouse master?

2. Click on this extract from the poster.

- What work are these paupers doing?
- The paupers believe they are treated much worse than slaves in the West Indies. Why would this statement have shocked people at this time?
- Why do you think the paupers' heads have been shaved?

3. Click on this extract from the poster.

- What has 'Joe' got in the truck?
- What is he going to do with it?

4. Click on this extract from the poster.

- What does this part of the poster tell you about the treatment of the old?
- Why do you think that the government was keen to make sure that people in workhouses worked?

5. Click on this extract from the poster.

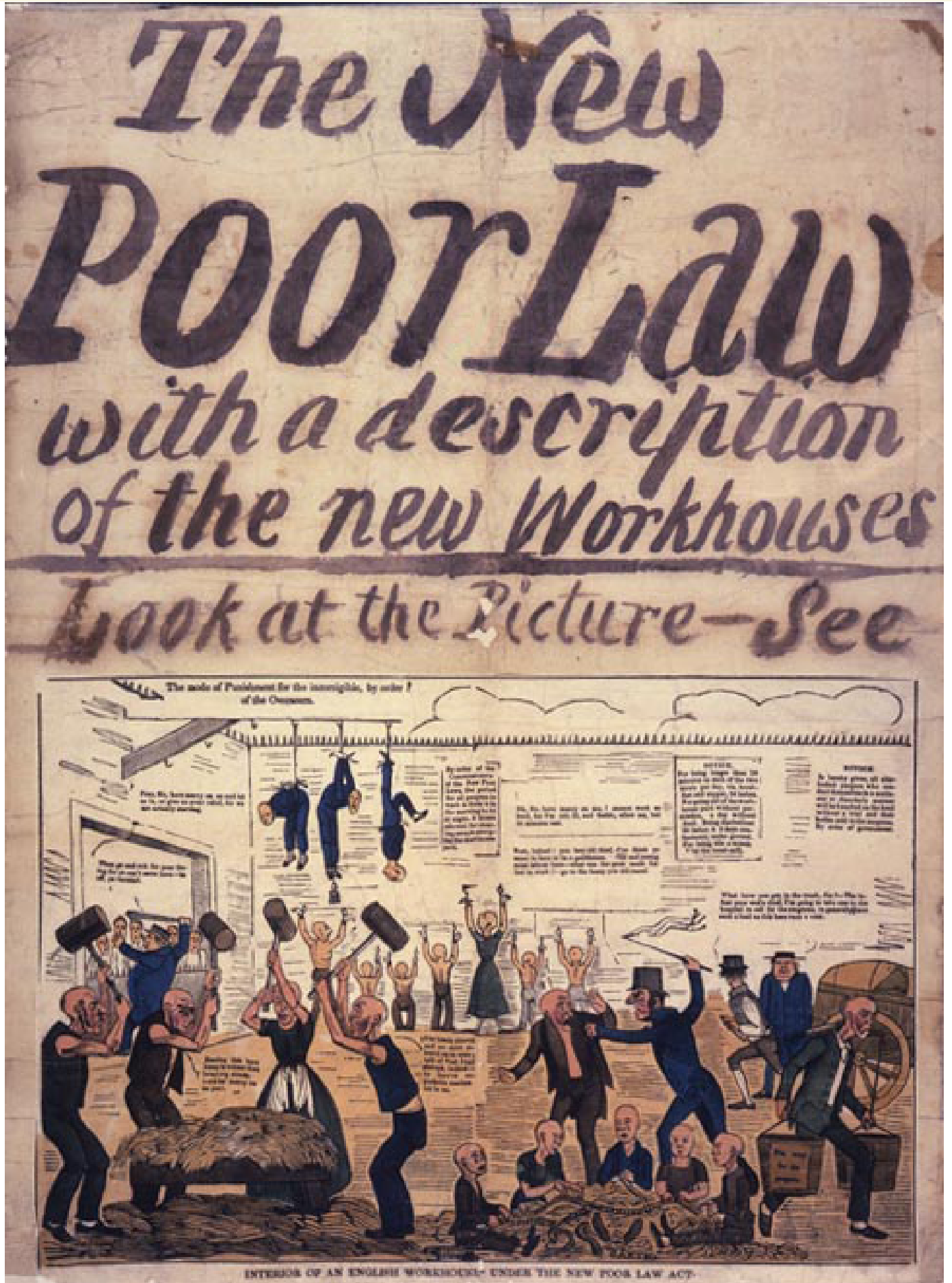
- According to the poster how long were inmates expected to work each day?
- How many hours sleep were they allowed?
- What punishments can you see in the poster?

6. What does the artist think about the new Poor Law?

7. What are the problems of using this poster as evidence of what the workhouses were like?

The New Poor Law poster, 1837.

Catalogue Ref: EXT 6/1



Source 1a: Detail of The New Poor Law poster, 1837.

Catalogue Ref: EXT 6/1



Transcript: Source 1a

[Man outside door:]

Pray, Sir, have mercy on us and let us in, or give us some relief, for we are actually starving.

[Man in doorway wielding a baton:]

Then go and rob for your living for ye can't enter here – be off, ye varmint.

Source 1b: Detail of The New Poor Law poster, 1837.

Catalogue Ref: EXT 6/1



Transcript: Source 1b

[Worker #1:]

Beating this here hemp is worsen than breaking stones. Lord ha' mercy on us poor.

[Worker #2:]

Our heads shaved and no shirt allowed us to wear; talk of Vest Ingy slaveries, indeed vy they're expectable mechanics to us.

Source 1c: Detail of The New Poor Law poster, 1837.

Catalogue Ref: EXT 6/1



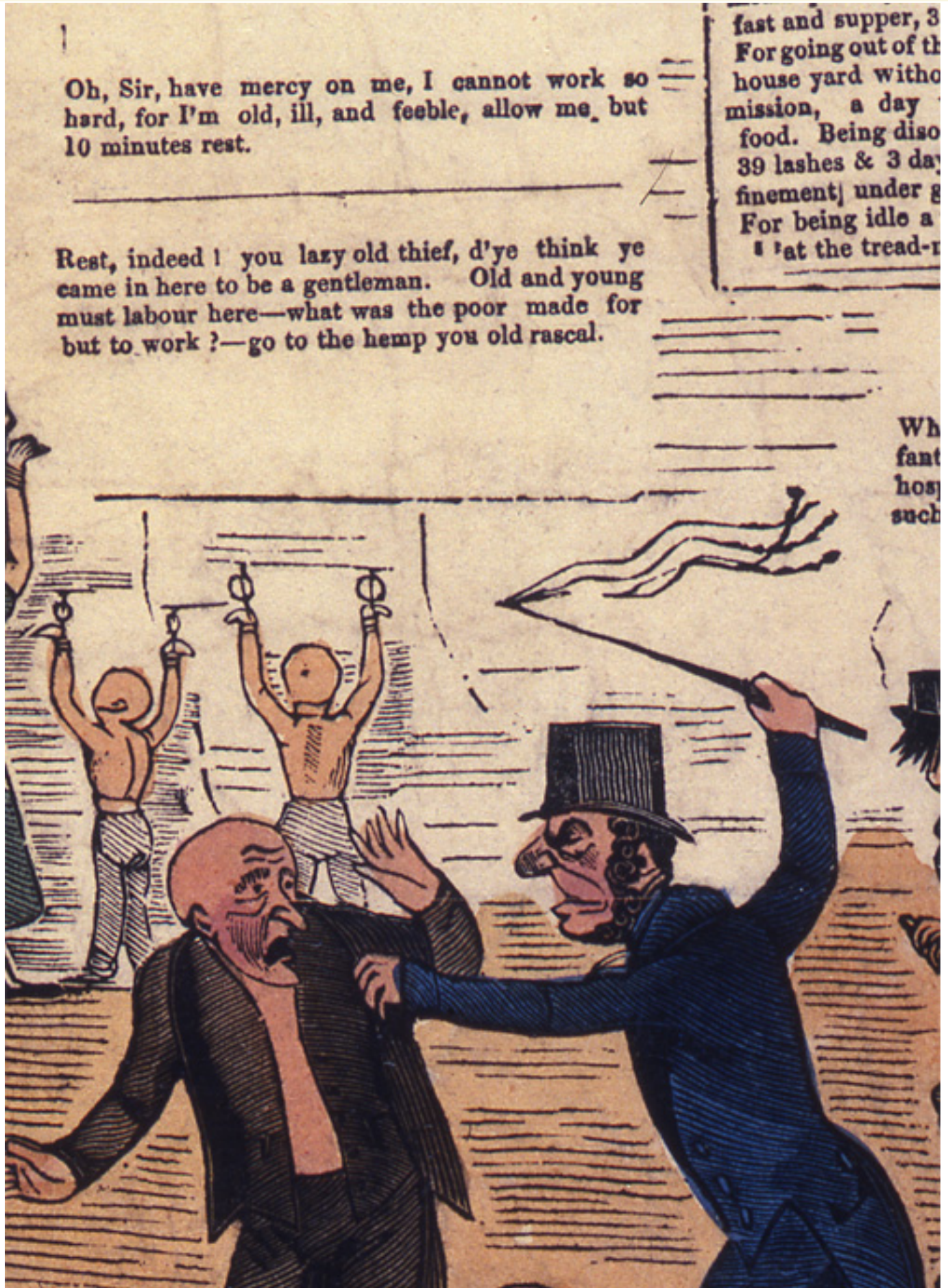
Transcript: Source 1c

[Conversation between a man wearing a hat and a man pulling a cart:]

What have you got in the truck, Joe? - The infant poor wot's died, I'm going to take one to the hospital to sell for the surgeons, we generally have such a load as this here once a week.

Source 1d: Detail of The New Poor Law poster, 1837.

Catalogue Ref: EXT 6/1



Transcript: Source 1d

[Man with shaved head:]

Oh, Sir, have mercy on me, I cannot work so hard, for I'm old, ill and feeble, allow me but 10 minutes rest.

[Man brandishing a whip:]

Rest, indeed! you lazy old thief, d'ye think ye came in here to be a gentleman. Old and young must labour here – what was the poor made for but to work? – go to the hemp you old rascal.

Source 1e: Detail of The New Poor Law poster, 1837.

Catalogue Ref: EXT 6/1



Transcript: Source 1e

By order of the Commissioners of the New Poor Laws, the period for all paupers to work is from 4 in the morning to 10 at night. 3 hours allowed for clearing away & sweeping the workhouse yard

NOTICE. For being longer than 10 minutes to each of the two meals per day, viz. breakfast and supper, 39 lashes. For going out of the workhouse yard without permission, a day without food. Being disobedient 29 lashes & 3 days confinement under ground. For being idle a month at the tread-mill.

NOTICE is hereby given, all ablebodied paupers who conduct themselves in a mutinous or disorderly manner will be knocked on the head without a trial and their bodies sold to the surgeons. By order of government.



Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

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