Beneath the Surface: A Country of Two Nations

By Joanne de Pennington
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Many Victorians struggled to understand and explain poverty. Was this because of circumstances beyond the individual's control or the direct result of their indolence? To discourage dependency, workhouse conditions were worse than the lowest standard of the independent labourer.

A country of two nations

Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws ... THE RICH AND THE POOR.

This extract from Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybil*, published in 1845, goes to the heart of one of the most controversial subjects of 19th century history - the extent to which industrialisation improved or depressed living standards, and the ways in which the poor were treated.

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For the first half of the 19th century the rural and urban poor had much in common: unsanitary and overcrowded housing, low wages, poor diet, insecure employment and the dreaded effects of sickness and old age. By 1851 the census showed the urban population was larger than that of the rural areas. Towns provided a wider range of jobs, but unskilled and casual workers continued to struggle with low wages and irregular incomes, the fear of accidents and the dread of slipping into that 'sunken sixth' of the workforce, the 'residuum' so close to the criminal underworld which Dickens wrote about.

Optimists and pessimists

The debate around industrialisation and poverty - its nature, extent, and impact - continues to sharply divide historians. In general terms, 'optimists' argue that industrialisation brought higher wages, and a better standard of living, whereas 'pessimists' argue that the quality of life for workers deteriorated especially between 1780 and 1850, with only limited improvements for some skilled sectors before the 1870s.

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The rich and the poor at Crystal Palace (Punch cartoon, 1851) ©

It would seem that only in the last quarter of the century did the standard of living for the industrial labourer began to rise, as prices fell rapidly and sanitation, housing and health improvements changed the urban environment. Whilst industrialisation brought a number of dramatic changes and opportunities, insecurity and the resultant downwards spiral into poverty remained a deeply entrenched continuity.

Yet, many Victorians struggled to understand and explain poverty. Was it because of personal misfortune, because of social circumstances beyond an individual's control, or, the direct result of a person's character, their laziness and indolence? Were the poor, therefore, 'deserving' or 'undeserving'? Who was responsible for those who became so poor that they could not maintain themselves and how should these paupers be cared for?

The labouring poor

At the beginning of the 19th century poverty was regarded as the natural condition of the labouring poor - those who worked with their hands. The fluctuations of harvests, the disruptions of war and the fine line between subsistence and penury were seen as inevitable and difficult to change.

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Since the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601 relief had been available for the poor within their parish, financed by the poor rate (a tax based on land and buildings), with 'outdoor relief' and the workhouse. Outdoor relief provided payments for a range of needs, or relief in kind such as clothing and food, with the intent of enabling the able-bodied poor to remain at home.

The workhouse provided 'indoor relief', for the sick, elderly or orphaned - the 'impotent' poor who were unable to support themselves. The principle of settlement, established in 1662, meant that travelling paupers could be returned to their home parish, usually that of their birth for relief, unless they carried a certificate which promised that their parish would reimburse the parish where they became dependent.

Rural and urban poverty

From 1780 and into the first quarter of the 19th century the poor relief system was under strain, with an increasing population and agricultural depressions. The enclosure movements dispossessed a generation from the land. Where common land was enclosed labourers lost a number of rural benefits such as grazing and fuel-gathering rights.


Horse and carriage ©

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Although there were regional variations, fluctuations in wages and food prices resulted in a number of riots and rick-burning, especially in the major agricultural areas of the south and east of England, between 1829-31.

The changes in manufacturing, begun in the textile industry, provided another area of employment for families and an apparent escape from the difficulties of the countryside. The rapid growth of the new industrial towns did not necessarily alleviate the endemic problem of unemployment and under-employment, or make life any more secure, although the relative cost of poor relief in these towns was lower than in the country.

Official attitudes to the relief of poverty

By 1832 the concern about the system of poor relief led to the setting up of a Royal Commission. At the same time principles and management of the old Poor Law were also challenged on the grounds both of mismanagement and inefficiency and its alleged cause of rapid population growth. The ideas of Malthus and Bentham had much influence on contemporary ideas. Malthus in his popular 'Essay on the Principles of Population' argued that agricultural production would be overtaken by demographic pressures, and that the only ways to check these were either by natural disasters to limit population or by individuals practising prudence and self-restraint.

A labour home ©

...the alleged generosity of outdoor relief benefited the feckless and reduced the resources available to the deserving poor.

The practice of giving child allowances under the old Poor Law was seen as encouraging large families while the alleged generosity of outdoor relief was seen as benefiting the feckless and reducing the resources available to the deserving poor. Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of Utilitarianism advocated judgement by rational criteria, underpinned the principle of 'the greatest good of the greatest number'. Government action was to be based on careful study of the 'facts'.

It was the combination of these ideas and developments, which became the basis of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 in England and Wales. The Act continued to rely on the parish rate and, set the principles of social policy for the rest of the century and beyond. It established the importance of local administration under centralised control and encouraged attitudes and images of poverty which dominated public perceptions in the 19th century.

Lowest standard of living


Hardship and despair was mitigated by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (Punch cartoon, 1894) ©

Designed to reduce the costs of poor relief, the Act placed the workhouse (provided by a union of parishes) at the centre of provision, with the guiding principle of 'less eligibility' - that workhouse conditions should be worse than the lowest living standards of the independent labourer - as its central tenet. Those entering the workhouse would find life there harsh, monotonous and characterised by the intent of improving the inmate's moral character. It was felt that local resources should be used more effectively and costs would be further reduced as paupers would be deterred by the appearance of the workhouses and knowledge of the harsh treatment of their 'inmates'.

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Although the Poor Law Commissioners (later the Poor Law Board) regulated conditions, it was an elected Board of Guardians who managed each union with waged staff to run the workhouse. The Act faced initial hostility, especially in the industrial north in 1837/8, where it was felt to be unsuitable for the patterns of industrial workers' needs, and amongst those in rural areas who felt that they best understood their area and its inhabitants. Radical politicians, such as the Chartists, likened workhouses to 'bastilles' and argued that the Act was an attempt to reduce wages and create a subservient workforce.

These attitudes and the cost of building new workhouses meant that the Act was not fully implemented for some 20 years. Although 'outdoor' relief for the poor was continued, the stigma attached to it and the low level of relief meant that fewer applied for it. Increasingly stringent controls, particularly after 1872, instilled in the poor the sense that they, not the state, were primarily responsible for maintaining themselves.

The workhouse


At dinner in a London workhouse ©

Many workhouses had a significant transient population, being under obligation to provide for anyone who applied. These wards appear to have provided shelter for many others, including those 'tramping poor' searching for seasonal work, although it is difficult to know exactly how the casual wards were used, or when and how often an individual or family entered a workhouse. In these casual wards vagrants were housed separately from longer-term residents as they were deemed to be the most workshy and had, it was feared, a potential for violence and criminal behaviour, and the potential to corrupt the deserving poor.

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What is clear from official records is that a high proportion of women were forced to resort to the workhouse - not only the 'fallen women' characterised in some Victorian novels but also deserted wives, widows with young children and unemployed servants. However, by the end of the Victorian period the largest group of inmates was elderly men, often long-term residents, along with the infirm and young orphans, although many of these youngsters were increasingly sent to 'foster homes', a practice which had first been widely adopted in Scotland.

The Scottish Poor Law


Aid in Scotland was provided by voluntary contributions and the ablebodied poor had no automatic right to relief (Punch cartoon, 1894) ©

In Scotland, a different system operated, with voluntary contributions distributed under the direction of the minister and elders of the Kirk and, from 1752, more strongly by the direction of the landowners, who were the principal ratepayers. The able-bodied poor had no right to statutory relief as in England. Scottish poor law reform developed differently, mainly because of the differences in agricultural organisation and in a later industrialisation of manufacture.

Unlike England, the poor had the right of legal appeal against the denial of relief.

The Scottish Poor Law Amendment Act of 1845 created a central Board of Supervisors and parochial boards, with the authority to raise local, necessary funds and decide on their distribution. Unlike England, the poor had the right of legal appeal against the denial of relief. Outdoor relief continued to be favoured, but the rise in costs and claims of extravagance and poor mismanagement brought demands for a more restricted system after 1868, with less use of the poorhouse and testing each applicant's need for support. By 1894 the creation of the Local Government Board made Scottish practice much closer to that of England.

Charity and self-help

Because the operations of the Poor Law were so circumscribed and the poor were unwilling to apply for relief, other ways of dealing with life's misfortunes became increasingly important. Almsgiving and charitable endowments already had a long history but from the end of the 18th century the number of voluntary charities gradually increased. Charity was directed at those least able to help themselves, such as children and the sick, while relief for the destitute was influenced both by the ideology of self-help and by evangelical religion.

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These placed an emphasis on the role of charity in encouraging moral regeneration and on the virtues of self-reliance and respectability. Like the poor law, charities sought to distinguish the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' poor. The Charity Organisation Society, founded in 1869, at a time when outdoor relief was being further curtailed, was partly an attempt to ensure that charity did not undermine the intent of state provision. Their use of an early form of social investigation - visiting homes and interviewing the poor - was designed to link assistance to observable conditions.


Mildmay hospital ©

People were not necessarily helpless or passive recipients of state intervention in nascent welfare provision, nor were they simply the beneficiaries of groups with charitable intent. Formally organised mutual aid - especially the friendly societies (the most popular form of social insurance for the working man and woman) formed from the late 18th century - levied a weekly subscription on members and provided financial assistance in times of need, such as sickness and death. Trade unions, which grew more slowly in the 19th century, usually offered similar benefits. Co-operative societies from the 1840s sought to provide cheap, unadulterated food for their members.

Conclusion


Banks, insurance policies and community assistance helped support the poor during hard times (Punch cartoon, 1894) ©

Penny savings banks were established to provide safe havens for small savers, while, in some parts of the country, early forms of insurance companies offered policies to pay for death benefits. High levels of infant mortality meant that, in some cases, insurance policies were taken out on babies' lives almost as soon as they were born. Even more important was the informal, mutual support within working class neighbourhoods for help in 'making ends meet'. This ranged from that of family and friends, the loan of money or goods, the taking in of lodgers or washing, and the availability of credit, resort to pawnshops and local moneylenders. These communal resources were all used to avoid the stigma of entry into the workhouse or the final indignity of a pauper funeral. Declining levels of poor relief during the century, therefore, did not necessarily mean that the needs of the poor were falling, only that they were continuing to find other ways of supporting themselves in times of need.

Find out more

Books

*Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Nineteenth Century Britain 1834-1914 - from Chadwick to Booth*by David Englander (Longman, 1998). A comprehensive account of poverty and the response to it in Victorian Britain, with an extensive bibliography of useful national, local and regional material.

Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain by Edwin Chadwick, 1842, ed. M.W. Flinn (1965). The full text of Chadwick's report includes his use of extracts from the reports of the local investigators. The book includes an introduction to the Report and an explanation of its significance to public health reform.

The English Town by Mark Girouard (Yale University Press 1995). A colourful illustrated introduction to all aspects of the history of towns with an extensive section on Victorian Britain. (publisher, date)

State, Society and the Poor in Nineteenth Century England by Alan Kidd, (Palgrave, 1999). This book in the Social History in Perspective series focuses as much on self-help, voluntary and charity provision for the poor as it does on assistance provided by the state.

Places to visit

The Public Record Office at Kew is the major repository of Poor Law Union, Commission and Board papers. Local History Libraries are a rich source of many of the records of the 19th century.

Thackray Medical Museum, Beckett Street, Leeds, LS9 7LN, Tel: 0113245 7084 (on the St James's Hospital/Jimmy's site). This museum is housed in the building that was the Leeds Union Workhouse built in 1861. A visit there opens with Robert Baker's description of Leeds in 1842 and an invitation to tour the reconstructed unhealthy and insanitary streets of the town. You are able to choose a character and follow their life expectancy, and to find out about the possible - and impossible - cures for illnesses.

Ripon Workhouse Museum, St Marygate, Ripon, North Yorkshire, HG4 1LX, Tel: 01765 690799. This is believed to be the only workhouse museum in the country, it is established in the Men's Casual Wards of 1877 in the Workhouse buildings. The cells, dayroom and workyard have been refurbished, and with a Hard Times Gallery of images, this museum gives a unique picture of the reality of the Poor Law at work.

The Workhouse, Southwell, Nottinghamshire. (Not yet open, but due to open at Easter 2002.) This workhouse is currently being renovated by the National Trust.

About the author

Joanne de Pennington is a lecturer at Trinity and All Saints College, University of Leeds. She specialises in 19th century social history and 20th century political history. She recently contributed to *The Practice of University History Teaching*, (Manchester University Press, 2000).