1.3 Poverty and poor relief before 1834

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic, you should be able to describe, explain and understand:
- the differences between rich and poor in nineteenth century Britain
- the reasons why there were so many poor people at the beginning of the nineteenth century
- how poor people were helped before 1834.

Getting an overview
Britain between 1815 and 1851 was a land of contrasts. Nowhere were these contrasts clearer than between rich and poor people.

of London and in the new industrial towns of the Midlands and north of England. It was these people whose work supplied much of the wealth and many of the comforts enjoyed by the rich.

Contrasts: rich and poor
Henry Mayhew and other writers found out that there were many more divisions in society than simply ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’.

The aristocracy
This term describes about 300 of the very richest families. The dukes and earls, viscounts and barons who were the heads of these families sat in the House of Lords, and many of them held important positions in government. They also owned vast estates – normally about 10,000 acres each, as well as country mansions and houses in London.

In their country mansions, the aristocracy lived on a grand scale. Each house was really a small community, with between forty and fifty indoor and outdoor servants to look after the needs of the owners. There would be, for example, gardeners, under-gardeners and grooms, valets and a butler, ladies’ maids, parlour maids and scullery maids, cooks and a housekeeper. If there were children in the family, there would be a governess and nurse-maids.

In 1849 and 1850 a series of articles about the lives of the poor in London were published in the Morning Chronicle. They were the work of investigative journalist Henry Mayhew, who interviewed hundreds of London’s poor.

The woman lived over a coal and potato shed, occupying a small room on the ‘second floor back’. In one corner of the room was rolled up the bed on the floor. Beside the window was a tub set upon a chair. At this she was busy washing, while on the table a small brown pan was filled with the newly washed shirts; beside it were the remains of her dinner, a piece of dry coarse bread, and half a cup of coffee. In answer to my questions she made these statements: I make shirts. I sell them at 2d, 2 1/2d and even 3d, but them has full linen fronts and linen wristbands and there are seven button-holes in each shirt. It takes a full five hours to do one. Average all the year round I can’t make more than 4s a week, and then there’s cotton and candles to buy out of that.

All things bright and beautiful
All creatures great and small
All things wise and wonderful
The Lord God made them all
The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate
God made them high and lowly
And order’d their estate.

Activities
1. Can you make a connection between Sources A, B and C?
2. How might the wearers of the shirts in Source A defend their life-style to the shirt-maker (Source B)?
3. Read Source C. What does it tell you about attitudes to rich and poor in mid-nineteenth century England?

In 1845, Benjamin Disraeli, later to become Prime Minister but who then was the Tory MP for Maidstone, Kent, published a novel called Sybil. In it he told of an imaginary queen who reigned over two nations: the rich and the poor. Most of the people who read Sybil knew that Disraeli was really writing about Great Britain. He was one of many writers who wanted their readers to know that there was another England about which they knew very little – whose people lived in the back streets and alleys of London and in the new industrial towns of the Midlands and north of England.
according to the season. They might, for example, spend the grouse-shooting season (August) in their Yorkshire house, the coldest parts of the winter in their Sussex house, and the fashionable ‘season’ (April to July), where clothes were shown off and parties, dinners and balls attended, in their London house.

**The gentry**
The country gentry were also landowners, but not on such a large scale as the aristocracy. They generally owned estates of 1,000–3,000 acres, and usually lived in a comfortable house surrounded by gardens, with a home farm that was managed by a steward or bailiff. The rest of their estate was let out to tenant farmers, who paid rent. Few country gentlemen could afford a London house as well, and so they spent most of their time living on their estates.

A landed gentleman did not have to work to earn his living. The interest payments from his investments and the rents from his estates provided his income. Some invested money in industrial concerns like mills and railways. Life for the gentry was not all hunting, shooting and fishing. Many of them took their local responsibilities very seriously. The women would visit the poor, sick and needy people living on their family’s estates and in nearby villages, and usually did what they could to help. The men became magistrates, Guardians of the Poor (see page x) and officers in the local yeomanry, and had a good deal of power and influence within the neighbourhood.

**The middle class**
The middle class consisted of men and women with an enormously wide range of jobs and incomes, yet they all had one thing in common: they did not have to earn a living by manual labour.

The bankers and merchants of London, the coal and iron masters of South Wales, the mill owners of Lancashire and Yorkshire, and the shipyard owners of Liverpool and Glasgow were all very wealthy men. Some of the wealthy members of the middle class had worked their way up from humble beginnings; many became closely involved in the business life of the towns in which they worked. Not only did they employ large work forces, but they also invested enormous sums of money in their own enterprises and the enterprises of others. They controlled the business life, and therefore the prosperity, of the cities in which they lived and worked.

There were also the doctors and lawyers who had had a university education and professional training. These, too, would have been considered middle class. However, the vast majority of middle-class people were not wealthy tycoons or trained professionals. They were shopkeepers and commercial travellers, teachers and railway guards, post-office clerks and coal merchants. Some of these were the people who had been given the vote by the 1832 Reform Act (see page x). Many of them earned less than the better paid members of the working class. A school-teacher, for example, might earn £60 a year compared to a cabinet maker’s £100. Yet the cabinet maker, because he earned money by working with his hands, could never be considered a member of the middle class.

**Source D:** A middle class family having tea.
The labouring poor: ‘those who will work’

Henry Mayhew divided the ‘labouring poor’ into ‘those who will work’, ‘those who cannot work’ and ‘those who will not work’. He found that the group he called ‘those who will work’ undertook an enormous range and variety of jobs. The work was always manual, which earned them the label ‘labouring’ or ‘working’ class’, but not all of it was badly paid.

**Skilled artisans**

The small group of highly skilled artisans – cabinet makers, jewellers, watchmakers, scientific instrument makers, breeches makers and hatters – could expect to earn between thirty and forty shillings a week. These trades, however, were generally found in London. In the new iron, engineering and textile industries of the Midlands and the north of England, there were also workers who could afford a similar standard of living. These were the engineers at coal mines and in machine-tool workshops, the most skilled people in iron foundries, and some foremen and overseers in textile factories.

The next group of working people earned between twenty shillings and thirty shillings a week. They included building trade craftsmen, mule spinners and iron workers. Some had to look for work away from home: masons and bricklayers often tramped miles to get work, and so did those leading gangs of men on railway building contracts (see pages x-y).

The important point about all of this work is that it was regular.

**Labourers**

Carrying, lifting, dragging, digging, trenching, blasting, reaping, mowing, washing, scrubbing, sweeping and a thousand and one other jobs had to be done by hand. The work was hard, boring

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**Source E:** A drawing of agricultural labourers published in *The Illustrated London News* in August 1846.
and sometimes dangerous. It had to be done in the pouring rain, the freezing snow and the blazing sun, and it was invariably poorly paid. All industries employed men (and often women) to do this hard manual labour.

- Navvies, originally builders of canals but by the mid-nineteenth century builders of railways (see page x) were regarded as the kings of labourers. Their work was strenuous and dangerous. In a good year a pickman and shoveller could earn as much as twenty-four shillings a week; in bad times their wage could fall as low as fifteen shillings. Coalminers’ work (see page y) was often as dangerous as that of the navvies. Their wages varied from district to district, but generally between 1830 and 1850 a weekly wage of between fifteen shillings and twenty-five shillings was about average for a good year.

- In 1851, there were over 1 million agricultural labourers who, together with 364,000 indoor farm servants, made up a work force of about 1.5 million. Some were expected to have specialist knowledge and skills, like shepherds and ploughmen, for example, but most were expected to turn their hands to anything that needed doing. Wages for farm labourers ranged from seven to fourteen shillings a week. Sometimes a cottage went with the job.

- Town labourers were less of a single, clearly defined group than the miners, navvies or agricultural labourers. They were the dock workers, the carters, the sweepers, the porters and the labourers in the brickyards, iron works and breweries. They could never be sure from day to day whether they would get work. In good times, if they were fit and healthy, there would be work for most of the year. In bad times, few worked for any length of time and lived on the edge of starvation.

The labouring poor: those who cannot work

For some of the year, there was little or no work for labourers. Some, like bricklayers and house-painters, could only work when the weather was fine. Others, like hat-makers and tailors, had most of their work when the rich and well-to-do wanted...
the latest fashions. When trade was bad (and this happened particularly in 1831, 1837, 1841–2 and 1846–7) thousands of workers were laid off. There was no redundancy money and no unemployment benefit. Only the skilled artisans might have put away enough money to live on in bad times. The rest had to make do as best they could. Some took what few goods they had to pawnbrokers and got a little money that way. Others relied on credit from local shop-keepers. Many begged; most existed on a near-starvation diet of bread, potatoes and tea.

For those who were sick or injured, life was a hand-to-mouth existence. Many accidents happened at work. Navvy-ing and mining often meant broken and smashed bones and torn ligaments and muscles. Agricultural labourers faced long hours of heavy work in all weathers. A poor diet, wet clothing and damp cottages made bronchitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis and arthritis common. Workers in factories and mills faced dangers from unfenced machinery. Illness or accident to one wage earner meant that the whole family suffered.

The old had neither the strength nor the health to work. There were no state pensions or supplementary benefits. The best that an elderly person could hope for was that a child, or other relative, would look after them until they died. Those for whom this was not possible faced a grim old age.

The labouring poor: those who will not work

Vagrants in tattered clothes tramping the roads between villages and towns were a common sight. Henry Mayhew noted that they were almost always men and boys, aged between fifteen and twenty-five. Some may well have started out as jobbing labourers, tramping from town to town looking for work. By the time they had become vagrants, they had no intention of working. They simply wandered from place to place, begging when they needed food. It was, of course, impossible to count them, but Mayhew estimated that there were some 40,000–100,000 destitute men and boys tramping around Great Britain.

Pick-pocketing, petty theft, housebreaking and burglary were all common. Those prepared to risk prison and transportation could ‘earn’ enough to live on. Some of this petty crime was well organised, with young boys being apprenticed to gangs and being taught their trade by experienced and successful thieves.

All the labouring poor relied on their own physical strength and fitness for their wages. When a labourer’s health failed, or he could find no work at all, he and his family would have no alternative but to turn to the parish for help.

**Activities**

1. **How helpful do you find the illustrations (Sources A, D, E and F) in understanding society in nineteenth century Britain?**

2. **a) There were similarities and differences between the lives of the aristocracy, gentry and middle class. Working with a partner, use the information in this section to copy and complete the Venn diagram below.**

   - Aristocracy
   - Gentry
   - Middle Class

   a) Were the similarities greater than the differences?

3. **a) Now look at Henry Mayhew’s three definitions of the ‘Labouring Poor’. Working with a partner, copy and complete the Venn diagram below.**

   - Those who will work
   - Those who will not work
   - Those who cannot work

   b) What did they all have in common?

4. At what point did people have to ask their parish for help? Use the Venn diagrams to help you plan your answer.
Why were there so many poor people at the beginning of the nineteenth century?

The previous section ‘Contrasts: rich and poor’ will have given you a lot of ideas as to why there were so many poor people at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Rural poverty

In rural areas, many agricultural labourers were very poor. The changes in agriculture (see page x) brought more employment in hedging and ditching, hoeing and harvesting. However, a growing population (see page y) meant that there were more and more people looking for work. Wages were low and a lot of work was seasonal. Enclosure might have meant more work, but it took away most of the common land, and agricultural labourers could no longer use the common land to graze a few sheep or a couple of cows or pigs. Women had been able to make a little money spinning wool at home, but this work had been mainly taken over by textile mills. This meant that the traditional ways of seeing themselves through bad times and to fill the gaps between seasonal work, were no longer open to most agricultural labourers and their families.

Source A: From William Cobbett Rural Rides published in 1830. Here, he commented on the agricultural labourers he saw as he rode toward Warminster, Wiltshire, in 1826.

The labourers here look as if they are half starved. I really am ashamed to ride a fat horse, to have a full belly and to have a clean shirt upon my back when I look at these wretched countrymen of mine, when I see them reeling with weakness, when I see their poor faces that are nothing but skin and bone.

For discussion

Go back to Source C and Disraeli’s division of the British people into ‘two nations’. Was he right?

Activities

Remind yourself! Read through the sections on the labouring poor again (pages xx-xx). As you read, jot down the reasons various groups of people and different occupations might have descended into poverty. Use a table like the one below to record your reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for poverty</th>
<th>People affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Challenge

Charles Dickens wrote about the rich and poor in his book ‘Oliver Twist’. Find out about Fagin. What did he do? How does he shed light on the poor in nineteenth century London?
Urban poverty

The great northern industrial towns, like Bradford and Manchester, with their woollen and cotton mills, provided jobs for people who lived in the area. But mill work was not always available. This was because:

- fashions could change and demands for certain kinds of cloth could decline
- the cotton crop could fail
- wool from one year’s shearing could be of poor quality
- there could be a sudden change in trade.

If any of these situations happened, workers were laid off.

Also, for some workers, like the handloom weavers, who had been respectable members of society earning a good wage, once machinery was used to make cloth, their particular skills were no longer needed. Some found work in mills and workshops; others were forced to accept greatly reduced wages, living close to the poverty line.

Source C: Wages of a handloom weaver in Bolton, Lancashire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1797</th>
<th>1800</th>
<th>1805</th>
<th>1810</th>
<th>1816</th>
<th>1820</th>
<th>1824</th>
<th>1830</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wage</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>25s</td>
<td>25s</td>
<td>19s</td>
<td>12s</td>
<td>9s</td>
<td>6s 6d</td>
<td>5s 6d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These were the underlying reasons for rural and urban poverty at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But there was another reason that were specific to the early years of the nineteenth century and which added to the problems that already existed. The event that had the biggest impact was the ending of the wars against Napoleon in 1815.

What was the impact of the ending of the wars with France?

Returning soldiers

Thousands of returning soldiers flooded the labour market, adding to the problem of shortage of jobs that already existed.

Bankrupt farmers

It had been impossible, during the last years of the wars, to import corn from continental Europe. Once there was peace, cheap foreign corn could again be imported from Europe. This forced the British farmers to keep their prices low. However, they had war-time taxes to pay, increases in the poor-rate (see page x) and interest to pay on loans raised to cover the cost of enclosure. Many went bankrupt, which often meant unemployment for their labourers. Those farmers who survived were forced to reduce the wages they paid to their workers.

Corn Laws

In 1815, MPs tried to improve the situation as far as the farming community was concerned. They passed the Corn Law, which said that foreign corn could not be imported until the price of British corn was as high as eighty shillings a quarter. Parliament hoped that this would hold the price of corn steady and therefore the price of bread would remain steady as well. This, in turn, should mean that, because farmers’ profits would not go wildly up and down, the wages paid to their labourers would remain steady as well.

The price of bread

Many labouring people, employed and unemployed, resented the Corn Laws. They believed it kept the price of bread unnecessarily high. The cost of buying bread was taking a larger and larger part of the family income, leaving less and less to live on.

Manufacturing slump

There was no longer any need for the vast quantities of iron and textiles that had
For discussion

Peace is supposed to bring prosperity. What, then, went wrong for Britain in the years immediately after 1815?

Activities

1 Many of the causes of poverty were linked. Use the information in this section to draw a spider diagram showing the causes of poverty and how they were linked together.

2 Work with two or three people. You are a team of investigative journalists. The year is 1820. You are going (as Henry Mayhew did) to find out about poverty in the cities and countryside. Who will you interview? What will they tell you? You must then decide how to present your findings. You might choose to present them as, for example, a tape recording of the interviews, a printed booklet or a PowerPoint presentation. The choice is yours!

How were the poor helped before 1834?

In 1815 there was a way of providing official help for the poor who could not support themselves. The framework of this system had been set up by the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601. This framework had remained, in spite of the tremendous changes that had taken place in the countryside and in the towns. It had remained unchanged partly because it was so flexible that it could be adapted to suit different local conditions, and partly because it was accepted by those who had to pay for it.

Overseers

Each parish was responsible for its own people. All property owners paid a poor-rate, which was collected by the Overseer of the Poor, who was appointed by the local magistrates. It was the overseer’s job to help, or ‘give relief’, to the poor by using the money collected. The overseer was a rate-payer and usually unpaid. Not all overseers were kind, generous men. Many did their best, but some were corrupt and not all the money collected reached the poor. Others put their own interests first by keeping the poor-rate as low as possible. The poor in these parishes were badly treated when compared with parishes where the magistrates appointed good overseers who collected a reasonable rate and used it well.

Paupers

Paupers were those men, women and children who received regular help (relief) from their parish. Paupers who could not work (look back at Henry Mayhew’s definitions on page x) were called the ‘impotent poor’. These were the old, widows, children, ill, injured and handicapped people and women with young children to support. They were usually given small sums of money to help them through difficult times.
The paupers who were able to work, but either could not or would not find work, caused the authorities great problems. They were often very poor indeed, and clearly needed some kind of help. However, because they were actually able to work (unlike the impotent poor) the parishes took a very different attitude to them. The overseers would always try to find work of some kind for them to do in exchange for the relief they received.

Married women automatically took their husband’s place of settlement.

People were, of course, allowed to move out of their parish to look for work. They had to take with them a Certificate of Settlement, which stated that their own parish would look after them if they ever needed relief. Lost certificates often resulted in fierce arguments between parishes!

**Settlement**

Many people moved from parish to parish in search of work. Often the parish in which they were living when they were finally forced to ask for relief was not the one in which they were born, or the one in which they had been married. In 1662, Parliament passed a Settlement Act that allowed overseers to send paupers back to their own parish to get relief. But which was their ‘own’ parish? A person had ‘settlement’ in a parish if he or she had been born there, or had worked there for at least a year, had moved there to start an apprenticeship, or had lived there in property worth more than £10 a year.

**Workhouses**

The able-bodied paupers were, as you have seen, a problem for the authorities. Up until 1782, parishes were allowed to build workhouses for the able-bodied poor. They were equipped with sufficient tools to enable the paupers to make goods to sell. All the able-bodied who wanted relief had to go in to a workhouse. Gilbert’s Act, passed by parliament in 1782, changed all this. Workhouses, or poor houses as they were sometimes called, could only be used for the impotent poor. All paupers who were capable of work had to be given relief outside the workhouse.

**Source A:** The parish workhouse of St James, London, painted in 1809.
Providing work for able-bodied paupers inside a workhouse was one thing. Finding them work outside, in the parish, was quite another. Often there was no work to be had, and overseers had to be quite inventive.

**The roundsman system**
This was a system that was widely used. The parish overseer gave the pauper a ‘ticket’ which he, or she, would take round to all the local employers. If there was a job to be done, the pauper would hand over the ticket. The employer would then pay the pauper exactly what the parish would have paid out in poor relief. In some areas, the parishes created work for the able-bodied paupers. When the work was done, the paupers were ‘paid’ in poor relief.

**The labour rate**
Some parishes used a system called the ‘labour rate’. Rate-payers had to pay a poor rate and a labour rate. The money collected from the labour rate was put into a fund from which paupers were paid when they worked for the parish.

**The allowance system**
Many people who were in work were still too poor to support their families. Many parishes tried to give relief to poor people according to their needs, not according to the work they had done, this was called the allowance system. This meant that the overseer had to take into consideration such things as the size of a pauper’s family.

Source B: Some parishes, like Winfarthing in Norfolk, used this very simple system to work out relief.

![Image](s906398_ph_016)

The overseers of Winfarthing gave a set allowance that depended on the size of a pauper’s family and changed between winter and summer. In the parish of Speenhamland, in Berkshire, the overseers operated a much more complicated system. It was based upon the size of a pauper’s family, but also on the price of bread.
The help given to paupers inside a workhouse was called ‘indoor relief’. The help given to paupers outside a workhouse, when they carried on living in their own homes, was called ‘outdoor relief’.

**How effective was the Poor Law?**

In small parishes, the Poor Law had worked well for over two hundred years. The overseer knew everyone in the parish. He knew which poor families deserved help, and which did not. He collected money (the poor rate) from wealthier parishioners, and distributed it fairly. At least, that was the theory, and what did happen, in hundreds of parishes. However, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the great changes you read about on page x-y were impacting on the operation of the poor law.

- The Poor Law had never been designed to cope with the changes that were happening in the countryside (see page x). Cities and towns were growing at a rapid rate and were often covered by just one or two parishes that could not cope with the financial demands made on them for poor relief.

- A bad year for trade or industry would mean that thousands of people would be claiming poor relief from the same parish.

- A growing population meant growing numbers of poor people claiming relief in all parishes.

The system of giving relief to the poor was stretched to breaking point.

**Activities**

1. a) Below are three scenarios, all relating to poor people needing help. For each scenario, put yourselves in the shoes of the parish overseer and work out what should happen. The year is 1815.

   (i) Mary and Samuel married in Sam’s parish of Settle, North Yorkshire. Mary came from the nearby parish of Rathmell. They moved into the parish of Bradford, thirty miles away, where they worked in a woollen mill. They have just been thrown out of work. They have no savings and need help from their parish.

   (ii) Walter is a young man living in the parish of Ipswich, Suffolk. He hates work and has been getting along by begging and stealing. He is now destitute and has asked his parish for help.

   (iii) Martha and George are a married couple with six children, living in the parish of Tiffield, Northamptonshire. George has broken his leg and so can’t work. He has asked his parish for help.

   b) Discuss your solutions with others in your class. Did you all make the same decisions?

2. Look at the different systems of helping the poor. Which, in your opinion was best (a) for the people paying the poor rate and (b) for the paupers receiving relief?

**Fascinating Fact**

In 1815, people rioted in London because the price of bread was so high.
For discussion

Why did able-bodied paupers pose such difficult problems for the authorities?

Challenge

Look back across this whole section. What pressures, between 1815 and 1834, were being put upon the system of poor relief?

Summary

- There were tremendous contrasts between rich and poor people. They were often ignorant of the ways in which each other lived and the prevailing attitude was that things should stay as they were.
- The journalist Henry Mayhew divided the richer people into ‘aristocracy’, ‘gentry’ and ‘middle class’. He divided the poor into ‘those who will work’, ‘those who will not work’ and ‘those who cannot work’.
- Changes in agriculture meant that there were more jobs, but an increase in population meant that there were more people looking for work.
- People living and working in the northern industrial towns suffered from cyclical unemployment, where they had work for some, but not all, of the year, and some, but not all, years.
- The years after 1815 were difficult ones because of returning soldiers looking for work adding to the numbers unemployed; farmers being made bankrupt because of trying to compete, price-wise, with imported cheap foreign wheat leading to an increase in unemployed agricultural labourers; and a manufacturing slump leading to an increase in unemployed urban employed.
- The Corn Laws, introduced in 1815 to protect farmers, were seen by the poor as keeping the price of bread artificially high.
- Before 1834, the poor were helped by their parish. ‘Settlement’ was very important because it determined which parish had to help a particular individual in need.
- Those who could not work were given a place in a local workhouse or poorhouse. Those who could work were given help outside the workhouse. Parishes used a range of different systems of giving help to their poorest people.