

The Workhouse

Welfare in the old days could be pretty cruel

Life in general isn't always easy and there are many finding it hard to make ends meet. Sometimes they can't get a job, or the one that they do have never seems to pay enough to cover everything. In most first-world countries a welfare system may be available to help the less fortunate cope with their finances and health issues; in some instances providing free medical assistance. Then, should the situation arise when a person is out of work they might qualify for unemployment benefit. The solution isn't ideal, certainly, and the stigma attached can lower a person's self-esteem; but it is streets ahead of what used to be.

The well known story by Charles Dickens of Oliver Twist gives some idea of the workhouse, an institution set up to deal with poverty and what to do about those individuals and families who were struggling to survive. This, however, took place predominantly in the 19th century and was a later version of the earlier workhouses of the 16th and 17th centuries. All were tough and intentionally so apparently, the harsh conditions geared to deterring people from applying for what was, in effect, government assistance. The New Poor Law of 1834 made it very clear that poor people were a burden on the public purse and they would not be allowed to forget it.

Those who did qualify, and they would have had to be pretty desperate to request assistance of this kind, were permitted entry to the workhouse under extremely strict conditions. All had to surrender their belongings, and families were often split up and housed in different sections of the establishment. Here they were provided shelter and food, but they had to work for it. Although they were paid it was a mere pittance for tasks such as rock breaking, factory work and cleaning; and one I have mentioned before – separating the fibres of old ropes, a tedious and painful job resulting in bleeding fingers.

Food wasn't up to much and usually of low quality. Gruel, bread and cheese seemed to be staple, meagre and not conducive to good health. Coupled with the unsanitary conditions many suffered from malnutrition and disease. Often called prisons for the poor it was a miracle any survived the workhouses.

These establishments were phased out over the late 19th and 20th centuries, the last one closing its doors in 1925. Needless to say, the welfare systems that replaced them were far more humane and provided a level of social fairness. Even so, the number of homeless and disadvantaged people continues to grow. Is there an answer? As yet, no-one seems to have come up with one. Let's just hope that re-establishing the workhouses isn't on anyone's agenda.

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