Living in the Victorian Workhouse

What Were Workhouses?

Workhouses were large buildings where poor people who had no home or job lived. It was introduced as part of the Poor Laws system, where those who were paupers could live and work. It was intended as a place for people to work themselves out of poverty, though many were seen as prisons for the poor, orphaned children, the sick, disabled, elderly and unmarried mothers.

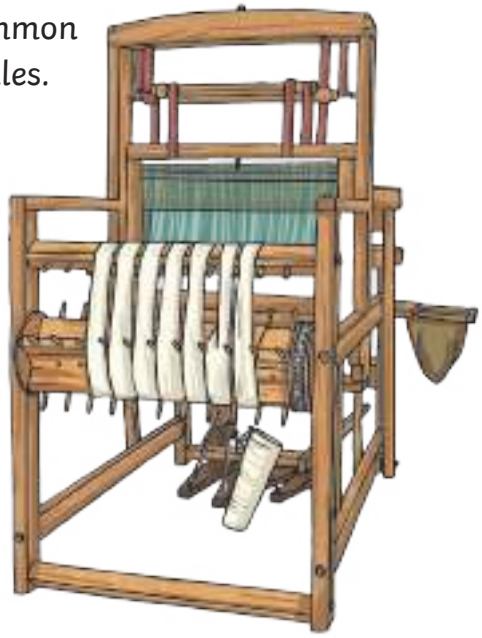
Living in a workhouse was the last thing people wanted to do. If a man with a wife and children had to enter a workhouse, his whole family had to go with him. It was thought to be shameful because it meant he could not look after his own family and he could not get a job.

Families in a Workhouse

The men, women, and children were housed in different parts of the building and were kept apart as often as possible, even when not working. People were crammed into as small a space as possible, with most people having to share beds. This meant that diseases, such as ringworm, spread easily.

Children had lessons in reading, writing, maths and religion for three hours a day. However, teachers were often cruel. There were rules in place against beating children but there are reports that some were hit with a ruler or stick in class. Girls were taught how to sew, as well as other skills that would help them become a maid when they left the workhouse at fourteen years old.

Food was small portions of plain, simple meals, usually bread, broth, cheese and occasionally meat. Second helpings were strictly forbidden and many people went hungry. It was a common punishment to miss mealtimes if you broke any rules.



Jobs in the Workhouse

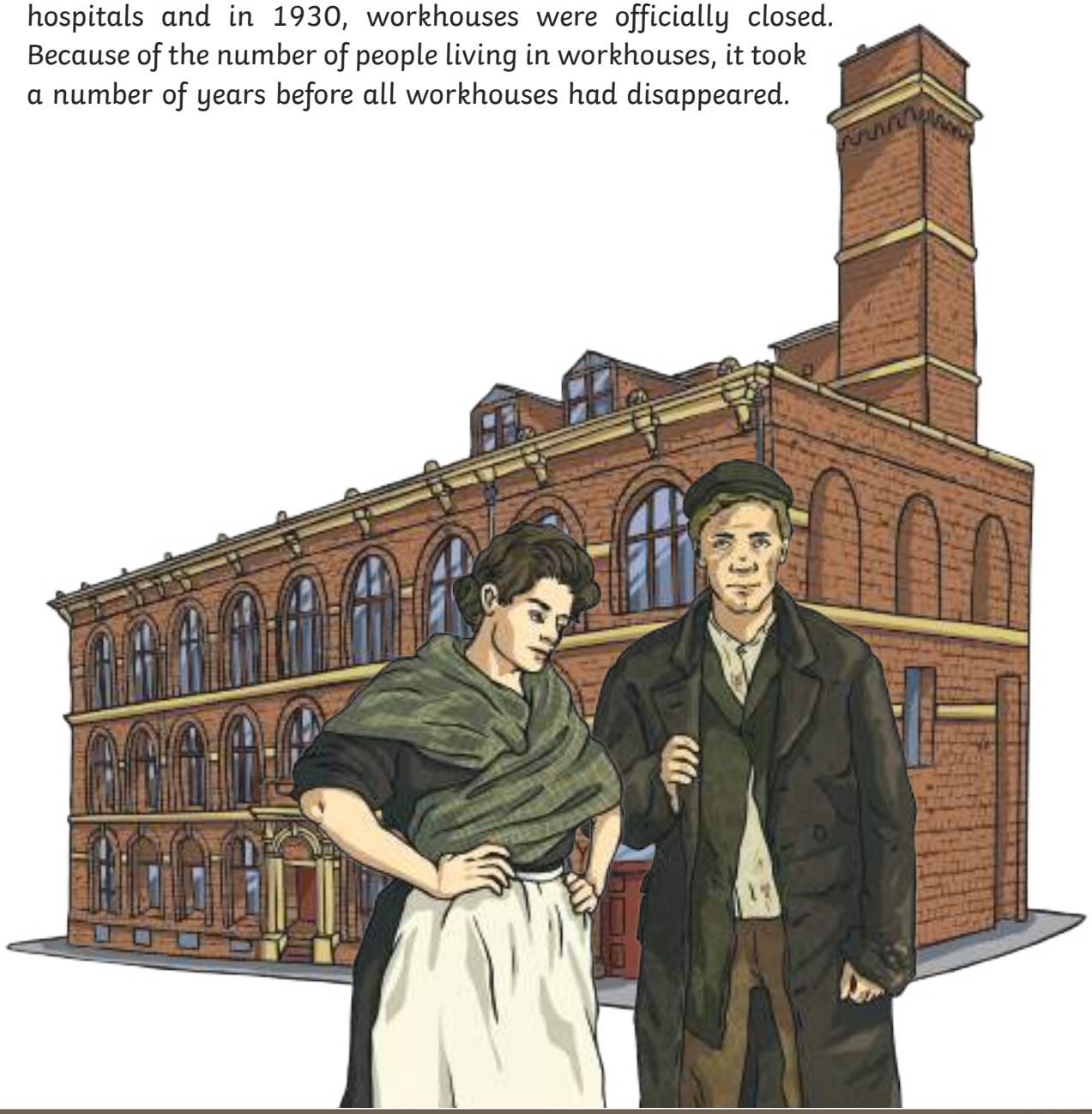
Jobs in the workhouse involved a lot of hard work. Men were expected to perform tiring tasks, such as stone breaking, grinding corn, chopping wood and working in the fields. Women were expected to sew and weave, clean the laundry, scrub the walls and floors and other general cleaning tasks. Both men and women had to work on unpicking old ropes, known as 'oakum'.

The working day in the workhouse was long. People would be woken early, around 5 a.m., and aside from prayers and meal times, were expected to work until they were sent to bed around 8 p.m.

Bad Reputation

Workhouses became known for their terrible conditions and people starving there. Many people, including the writer Charles Dickens, were against their use. Dickens famously used a workhouse as part of the setting for his book, Oliver Twist, showing them to be cruel places.

By 1929, new laws were introduced to allow workhouses to be turned into hospitals and in 1930, workhouses were officially closed. Because of the number of people living in workhouses, it took a number of years before all workhouses had disappeared.



Questions

1. What were workhouses introduced as part of? Tick **one.**

   - ○ The Workhouse Laws
   - ○ The poor Laws
   - ○ The Homeless Laws
   - ○ The working Laws

2. Which of these people were sent to the workhouse? Tick **two.**

   - ○ the sick
   - ○ the wealthy
   - ○ the elderly
   - ○ the employed

3. **Find** and **copy** a word which means **squeezed.**

   _____

4. What food were people in the workhouse fed?

   _____

5. Tick to say whether each job was done by men or women.

Job	Men	Women
Scrubbing the walls and floors		
Working in the fields		
Breaking stones		
Sewing and weaving		

6. What was the name of the book written by Charles Dickens that is set in a workhouse. Tick **one.**

   - ○ Bad Reputation
   - ○ Oliver Twist
   - ○ Cruel Teachers
   - ○ The Poor Laws

7. Why do you think it took a number of years for all workhouses to disappear? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

_____

_____

_____

8. Why do you think people feared being sent to the workhouse?

_____

_____

_____

Answers

1. What were workhouses introduced as part of? Tick **one.**

   - ○ The Workhouse Laws
   - ✓ The poor Laws
   - ○ The Homeless Laws
   - ○ The working Laws

2. Which of these people were sent to the workhouse? Tick **two.**

   - ✓ the sick
   - ○ the wealthy
   - ✓ the elderly
   - ○ the employed

3. **Find** and **copy** a word which means **squeezed.**

   crammed

4. What food were people in the workhouse fed?

   People in the workhouse were fed bread, broth, cheese and occasionally meat.

5. Tick to say whether each job was done by men or women.

Job	Men	Women
Scrubbing the walls and floors		✓
Working in the fields	✓	
Breaking stones	✓	
Sewing and weaving		✓

6. What was the name of the book written by Charles Dickens that is set in a workhouse. Tick **one.**

   - ○ Bad Reputation
   - ✓ Oliver Twist
   - ○ Cruel Teachers
   - ○ The Poor Laws

7. Why do you think it took a number of years for all workhouses to disappear? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Pupil's own response, referring to the text, such as: I think it took a long time for all workhouses to disappear because there were a lot of people who lived there that would need to find a new place to live and new jobs. It would have taken a long time to move everyone as there were a lot of workhouses.

8. Why do you think people feared being sent to the workhouse?

Pupil's own response, referring to the text, such as: I think people feared going to the workhouse because the conditions were terrible. People had to do hard work and had a small amount of basic food, which you could miss if you did something wrong. People were also split up from their family and had to share beds.