

THOUGHTCO.

British Poor Law Reform in the Industrial Revolution

by Robert Wilde (historian), updated July 16, 2018

One of the most infamous British laws of the modern age was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. It was designed to deal with the rising costs of poor relief, and reform a system from the Elizabethan era unable to cope with the urbanization and industrialization of the Industrial Revolution (more on coal, iron, steam) by sending all able-bodied people in need of poor relief into workhouses where conditions were deliberately harsh.

The State of Poverty Relief Before the Nineteenth Century

The treatment of the poor in Britain before the major nineteenth-century laws depended on a large element of charity. The middle class paid a Parish poor rate and often saw the increasing poverty of the era merely as a financial worry. They often wanted the cheapest, or most cost-effective, way of treating the poor. There was little engagement with the causes of poverty, which ranged from illness, poor education, disease, disability, underemployment, and poor transport preventing movement to regions with more jobs, to economic changes which removed domestic industry and agricultural changes which left many without jobs. Poor harvests caused grain prices to rise, and high housing prices led to greater debt. Instead, Britain largely viewed the poor as one of two types. The 'deserving' poor, those who were old, handicapped, infirm or too young to work, were considered blameless as they obviously couldn't work, and their numbers stayed more or less even across the eighteenth century. On the other hand, the able-bodied who were without work were considered 'undeserving' poor, thought of as lazy drunkards who could have got a job if they needed one. People simply didn't realize at this point how the changing economy could affect workers.

Poverty was also feared. Some worried about deprivation, those in charge worried about the increase in expenditure needed to deal with them, as well as a widely perceived threat of revolution and anarchy.

Legal Developments Before the Nineteenth Century

The great Elizabethan Poor Law Act was passed at the start of the seventeenth century. This was designed to fit the needs of the static, rural English society of the time, not that of the industrializing centuries afterward. A poor rate was levied to pay for the poor, and the parish was the unit of administration. Unpaid, local Justices of the Peace administered the relief, which was supplemented by local charity. The act was motivated by the need to secure public order. Outdoor relief – giving money or supplies to people on the street – was coupled with indoor relief, where people had to enter a 'Workhouse' or similar 'correctional' facility, where everything they did was tightly controlled.

The 1662 Act of Settlement acted to cover up a loophole in the system, under which parishes were shipping sick and destitute people into other areas. Now you could only receive relief in your area of birth, marriage or long-term living. A certificate was produced, and the poor had to present this if they moved, to say where they came from, impinging on freedom of labor movement. A 1722 act made it easier to set up workhouses into which to funnel your poor, and provided an early 'test' to see if people should be forced in. Sixty years later more laws made it cheaper to create a workhouse, allowing parishes to team up to create one. Although the workhouses were meant for the able-bodied, at this point it was mainly the infirm that were sent to them. However, the Act of 1796 removed the 1722 workhouse act when it became clear a period of mass unemployment would fill the workhouses.

The Old Poor Law

The result was the absence of a real system. As everything was based on the parish, there was a huge amount of regional diversity. Some areas used mainly outdoor relief, some provided work for the poor, others used workhouses. Substantial power over the poor was given to local people, who ranged from honest and interested to dishonest and bigoted. The whole poor law system was unaccountable and unprofessional.

Forms of relief could include each rate payer agreeing to support a certain number of workers – depending on their poor rate assessment – or just paying wages. The 'rounds' system saw laborers sent round the parish until they found work. An allowance system, where food or money was given out to people on a sliding scale according to family size, was used in some areas, but this was believed to encourage idleness and poor fiscal policy among the (potentially) poor. The Speenhamland System was created in 1795 in Berkshire. A stop-gap system to stave off mass destitution, it was created by the magistrates of Speen and

quickly adopted around England. Their motivation was a set of crises which occurred in the 1790s: rising population, enclosure, wartime prices, bad harvests, and fear of a British French Revolution.

The results of these systems were that farmers kept wages down as the parish would make up the shortfall, effectively giving employers relief as well as the poor. While many were saved from starvation, others were degraded by doing their work but still needing poor relief to make their earnings economically viable.

The Push to Reform

Poverty was far from a new problem when steps were taken to reform the poor law in the nineteenth century, but the industrial revolution had changed the way poverty was viewed, and the impact it had. The rapid growth of dense urban areas with their problems of public health, housing, crime, and poverty was clearly not suited to the old system.

One pressure to reform the poor relief system came from the rising cost of the poor rate which rapidly increased. Poor-rate payers began to see poor relief as a financial problem, not fully understanding the effects of war, and poor relief grew to 2% of the Gross National Income. This difficulty was not spread evenly over England, and the depressed south, near London, was hit hardest. In addition, influential people were beginning to see the poor law as out of date, wasteful, and a threat to both the economy and the free movement of labor, as well as encouraging large families, idleness, and drinking. The Swing Riots of 1830 further encouraged demands for new, harsher, measures on the poor.

The Poor Law Report of 1834

Parliamentary commissions in 1817 and 1824 had criticized the old system but offered no alternatives. In 1834 this changed with the creation of the Royal Commission of Edwin Chadwick and Nassau Senior, men who wanted to reform the poor law on a utilitarian basis. Critical of amateur organization and desirous for greater uniformity, they aimed for the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number.' The resulting Poor Law Report of 1834 had is widely regarded as a classic text in social history.

The commission sent out questionnaires to over 15,000 parishes and only heard back from around 10%. Then they send assistant commissioners to roughly a third of all poor law authorities. They were not seeking to end the causes of poverty – it was considered inevitable, and necessary for cheap labor – but to change how the poor was treated. The result was an attack on the old poor law, saying it was costly, badly run, out of date, too regionalized and encouraged indolence and vice. The suggested alternative was the strict implementation of Bentham's pain-pleasure principle: the destitute would have to balance the pain of the workhouse against getting a job. Relief would be given for the able-bodied only in the workhouse, and abolished outside it, while the state of the workhouse should be lower than that of the poorest, but still employed, laborer. This was 'less eligibility'.

The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act

A direct response to the 1834 report, the PLAA created a new central body to oversee poor law, with Chadwick as secretary. They sent out assistant commissioners to oversee the creation of workhouses and the implementation of the act. Parishes were grouped into unions for better administration – 13,427 parishes into 573 unions – and each had a board of guardians elected by ratepayers. Less eligibility was accepted as a key idea, but outdoor relief for the able-bodied wasn't abolished after political opposition. New workhouses were built for them, at the expense of the parishes, and a paid matron and master would be in charge of the difficult balance of keeping workhouse life lower than paid labor, but still humane. As the able-bodied could often get outdoor relief, the workhouses filled with the sick and old.

It took until 1868 for the entire country to be unionized, but the boards worked hard to provide efficient and occasionally humane services, despite sometimes difficult agglomerations of parishes. Salaried officials replaced volunteers, providing a major development in local government services and the collection of other information for policy changes (e.g. Chadwick's use of the poor law health officers to reform public health legislation). Education of poor children was begun inside.

There was opposition, such as the politician who referred to it as the "starvation and infanticide act", and several locations saw violence. However, opposition gradually declined as the economy improved, and after the system became more flexible when Chadwick was removed from power in 1841. Workhouses tended to swing from nearly empty to full depending on the bouts of periodic unemployment, and the conditions depended on the generosity of the staff working there. The events in Andover, which caused a scandal for the poor treatment, were unusual rather than typical, but a select committee was created in 1846 which created a new Poor Law Board with a president who sat in parliament.

Criticism of the Act

The evidence of the commissioners has been called into question. The poor rate was not necessarily higher in areas making large-scale use of the Speenhamland system and their judgments on what caused poverty were wrong. The idea that high birth rates were connected to allowance systems is now also largely rejected. Poor rate expenditure was already falling by 1818, and the Speenhamland system was able to mostly disappear by 1834, but this was ignored. The nature of unemployment in industrial areas, created by the cyclical employment cycle, was also misidentified.

There was criticism at the time, from campaigners who highlighted the inhumanity of the workhouses, to Justices of the Peace upset they had lost power, to radicals concerned with civil liberties. But the act was the first national, monitored central government program for poor relief.

Outcome

The basic demands of the act weren't being properly implemented by the 1840s, and in the 1860s the unemployment caused by the American Civil War and the collapse of cotton supplies led to outdoor relief returning. People began to look at the causes of poverty, rather than simply reacting to ideas of unemployment and allowance systems. Ultimately, while the costs of poor relief initially fell, much of this was due to the return of peace in Europe, and the rate rose again as the population rose.