Workhouses

The primary purpose of the **Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834** (known as the **New Poor Law**) was to **reduce the soaring cost of poor relief** and to **stop the able-bodied poor from relying on public money**.

Passed by the British Parliament under the Whig government, the law aimed to achieve these goals through several major changes:

Key Aims and Features

- **Cut Costs:** Between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, taxes for supporting the poor (called "poor rates") grew very expensive, jumping from about £2 million to nearly £8 million.
- **End Outdoor Relief for the Able-Bodied:** The law stopped giving financial or material aid ("outdoor relief") like money or food to able-bodied people in their own homes.
- **Introduce the Workhouse Test:** ***If able-bodied people wanted help, they had to go live inside a centralized workhouse.***
- **Apply the Principle of "Less Eligibility":** Conditions inside the workhouses were intentionally made harsher, harder, and more degrading than the life of the poorest independent laborer outside. The idea was to create a strong deterrent so that only the truly desperate would ask for help.
- **Centralize Administration:** It replaced the old, uncoordinated parish-by-parish system with a centralized national board (the Poor Law Commission) and grouped individual parishes into about 600 regional "Poor Law Unions," each with its own local Board of Guardians and workhouse.

Why was the Poor Law bad?

The Poor Law (especially the **Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834** in Britain) was widely criticized and considered cruel because it punished the poor, broke up families, and treated poverty as a moral failing rather than an economic problem.

Key Reasons the New Poor Law Was Considered Bad

- **The Principle of "Less Eligibility":** Workhouses were deliberately designed to be harsher and more terrifying than the lowest-paying, most miserable job available outside. The goal was to deter anyone who wasn't truly destitute from asking for help.
- **Separation of Families:** Husbands, wives, and children were split up upon entering the workhouse and were only allowed to see each other briefly during mealtimes or religious services.
- **Prison-Like Conditions:** Workhouses resembled prisons. Inmates wore uniforms, faced strict rules, ate plain and uninteresting food, and were subjected to hard, monotonous labor (such as breaking stones or picking oakum).
- **Abolition of "Outdoor Relief":** The 1834 law largely ended cash or food help given to people in their own homes. Struggling families had no choice but to enter a workhouse or starve.
- **Ignored Economic Realities:** Lawmakers and economists of the era (influenced by figures like Thomas Malthus) believed that poverty was caused by laziness or overpopulation rather than low wages, bad harvests, or unemployment. As a result, the law offered humiliation instead of real solutions.
- **Harsh Treatment of the Vulnerable:** The system did not distinguish well between the "idle" and the genuinely vulnerable, such as the sick, the elderly, or orphaned children, forcing them into squalid and degrading environments. As noted in historical discussions on Reddit, Victorian workhouses were intentionally made repulsive to frighten people away from seeking aid.