

## *Workhouses 1*

### The harsh new workhouses

#### **The workhouse system**

By the end of the 17th century the workhouse system was becoming well established, and the *General Workhouse Act* of 1723 gave parishes the authority to build their own workhouses or join with other parishes to do so.

Expenditure on the poor had been steadily rising in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, along with the rise in the general population, and the combination of the workhouse system plus outside help, in the form of money or essential provisions, was placing ever greater demands upon the poor rate.

#### **The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834**

This harsh new legislation marked a major watershed in the treatment of paupers. Up to this time the responsibility for poor relief lay at parish level in the hands of the *Overseers of the Poor* and under the supervision of the county *Justices of the Peace*.

The new Act set up the *Poor Law Commission for England and Wales*, charged with forcing unions of parishes to carry out poor relief in a new, and less costly, way. The new *Poor Law Unions* were to be supervised by *Boards of Guardians*, elected by the ratepayers and prominent landowners of the parish. As well as appointing officials such as the relieving officer and the workhouse master to run the new workhouse unions, they also supervised the removal of the poor under the settlement laws, and agreed payments with other unions to take on "their" paupers.

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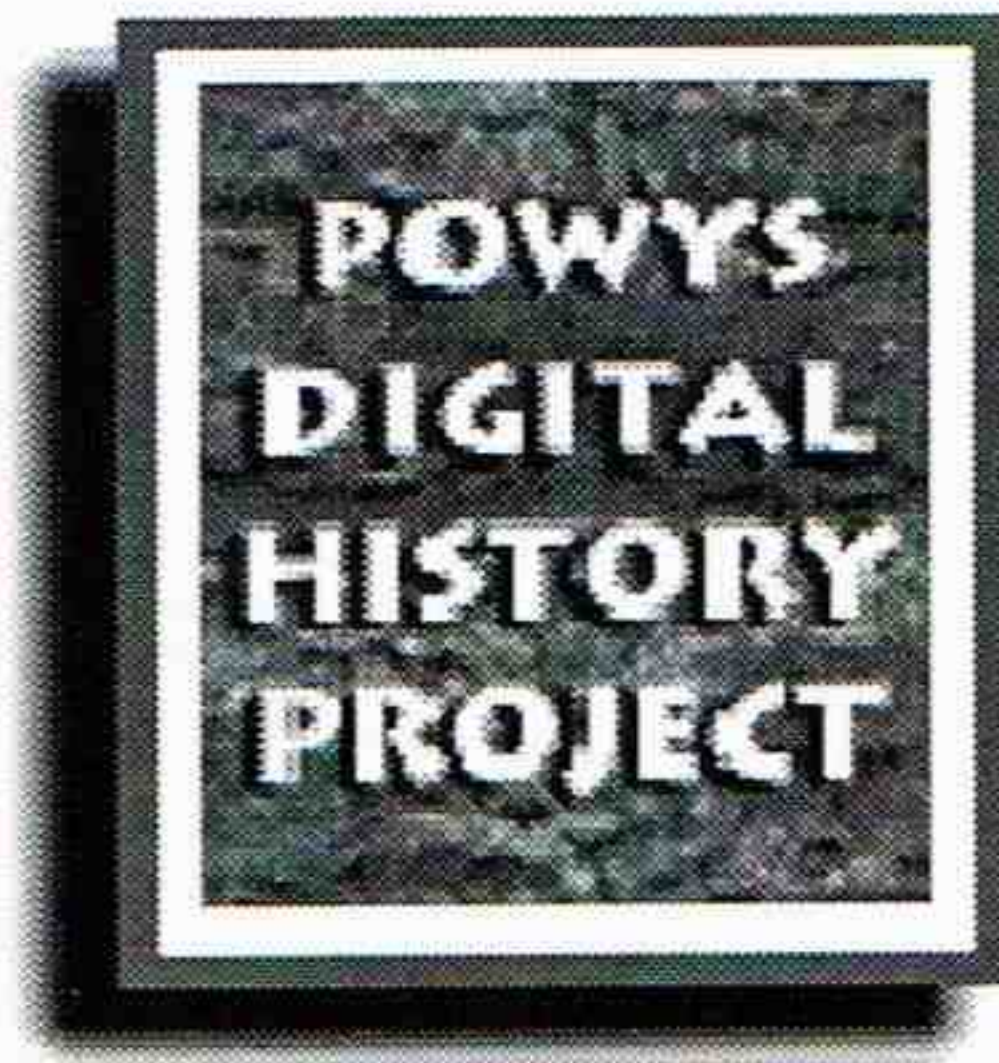
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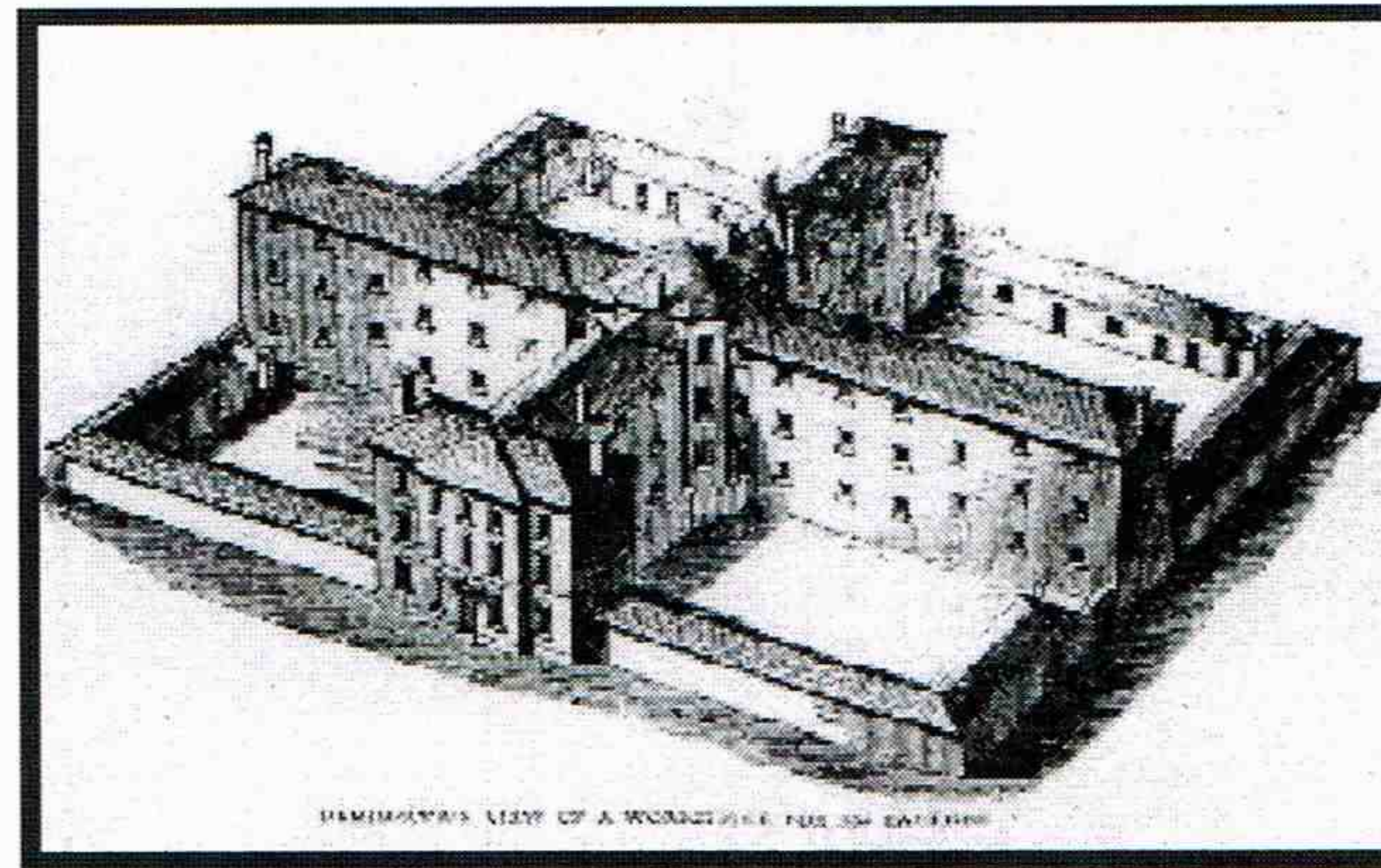


## *Workhouses 2*

### Places of last resort

#### **A spartan regime for desperate people**

The 1834 Act replaced the "Old Poor Law", dating from the time of Elizabeth 1. It was a deliberately ruthless measure, intended to wipe out "pauperism", which was judged to be caused by the idleness, fecklessness, drunkenness, and over-dependence on poor relief of



"the lowest class". This was to be brought about by building large, institutional workhouses which were intended to be so harsh and hostile that only the truly destitute would seek refuge in

them. They were to be the places of last resort.

#### **Separating families**

Perhaps the cruellest aspect of the strict and spartan regime in these places was the practice of separating husbands and wives and parents and children. Not only were they forced to stay in different parts of the workhouse, but they were not even permitted to meet in the communal areas such as the chapel.

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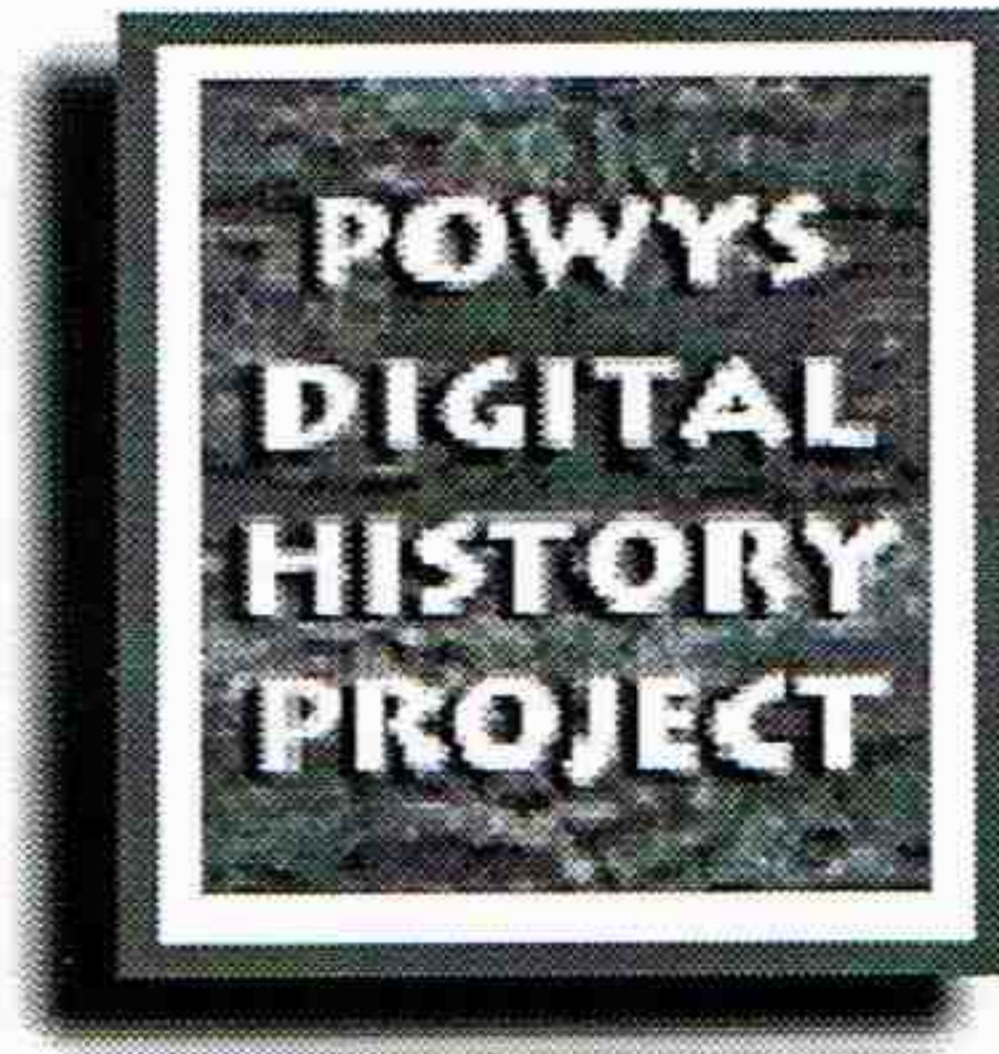
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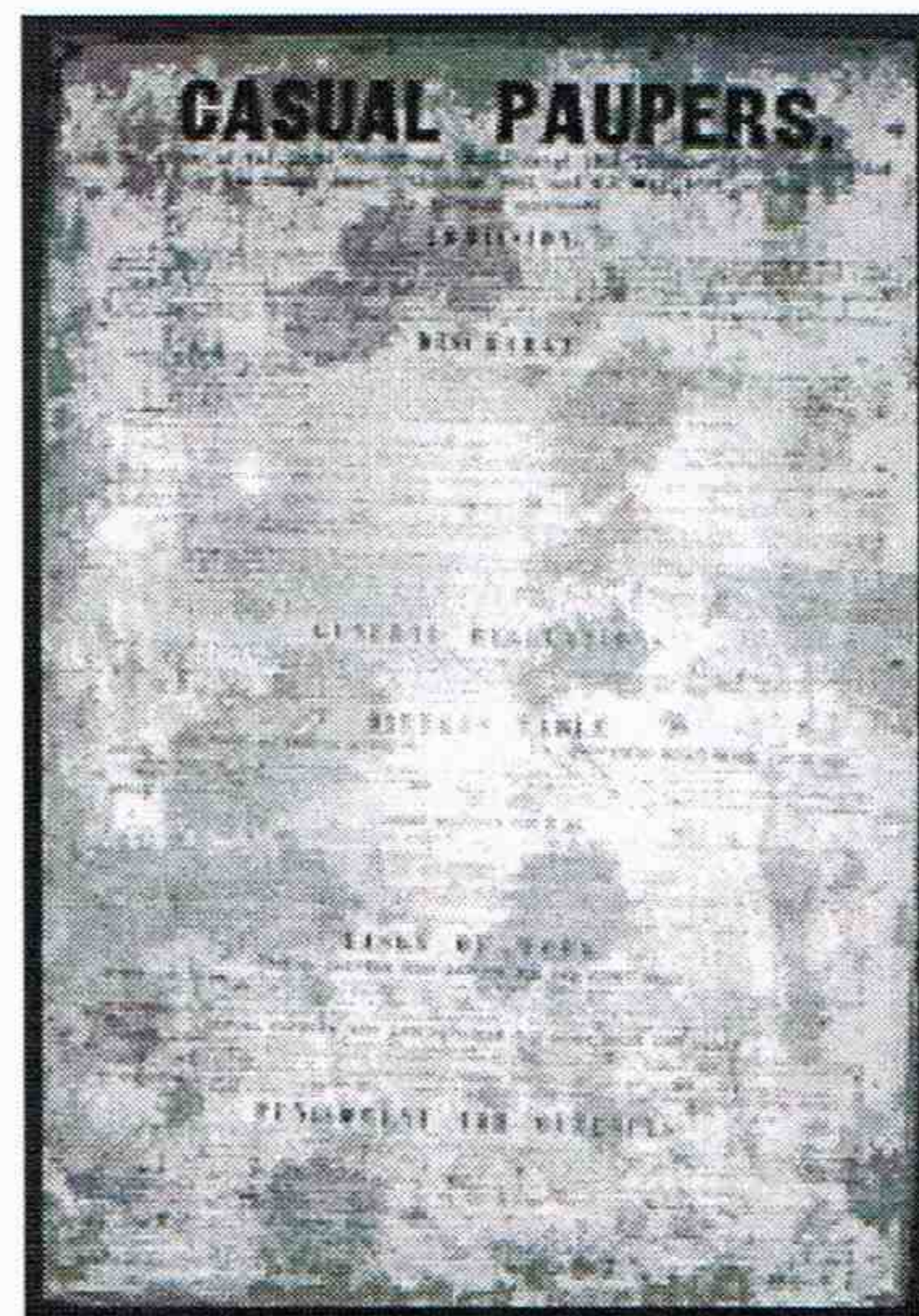


## Workhouses 3

### Breaking stones and pints of gruel

#### The rules for 'Casual Paupers'

The official regulations quoted below, which were to be displayed in all workhouses, really bring home the alarmingly harsh regimes which were maintained in these places over many years. The following extracts are taken from *Regulations of the Local Government Board* dated December 1882, with later amendments, as applicable to "Casual Paupers".



Powys  
County Archives

#### Dietary Table: Supper.

*Males above 15 years of age* - 8 oz. of Bread or 6 oz of Bread, and 1 pint of Gruel or 1 pint of Broth.

*Females above 15 years of age, Children from 7 to 15 years of age* - 6 oz of Bread, and 1 pint of Gruel or 1 pint of Broth.

**Breakfast** - same as Supper.

*Children under seven years of age:*  
For each child under the age of seven months - half pint of Milk and half oz of Sugar. For each child between the ages of seven months and two years - half pint of Milk, half oz of Sugar, and 2 oz of Bread. For each child between the ages of two years and seven years - half pint of Milk, 4 oz of Bread, and

half oz of Cheese.

#### Tasks of Work.

*Casual Paupers who are detained for more than one night:*

**As regards Males, for each entire day of detention -**

The breaking of seven cwt. of Stones, or other such quantity not less than five cwt. nor more than thirteen cwt. as the Guardians having regard to the nature of the Stone, may prescribe. The stone shall be broken to such a size as the Guardians, having regard to the nature thereof, may prescribe; or

The picking of four pounds of unbeaten or eight pounds of beaten Oakum; or

Nine hours' work in digging or pumping, or cutting wood, or grinding corn.

**As regards Females, for each entire day of detention -**

The picking of two pounds of unbeaten or four pounds of beaten Oakum; or

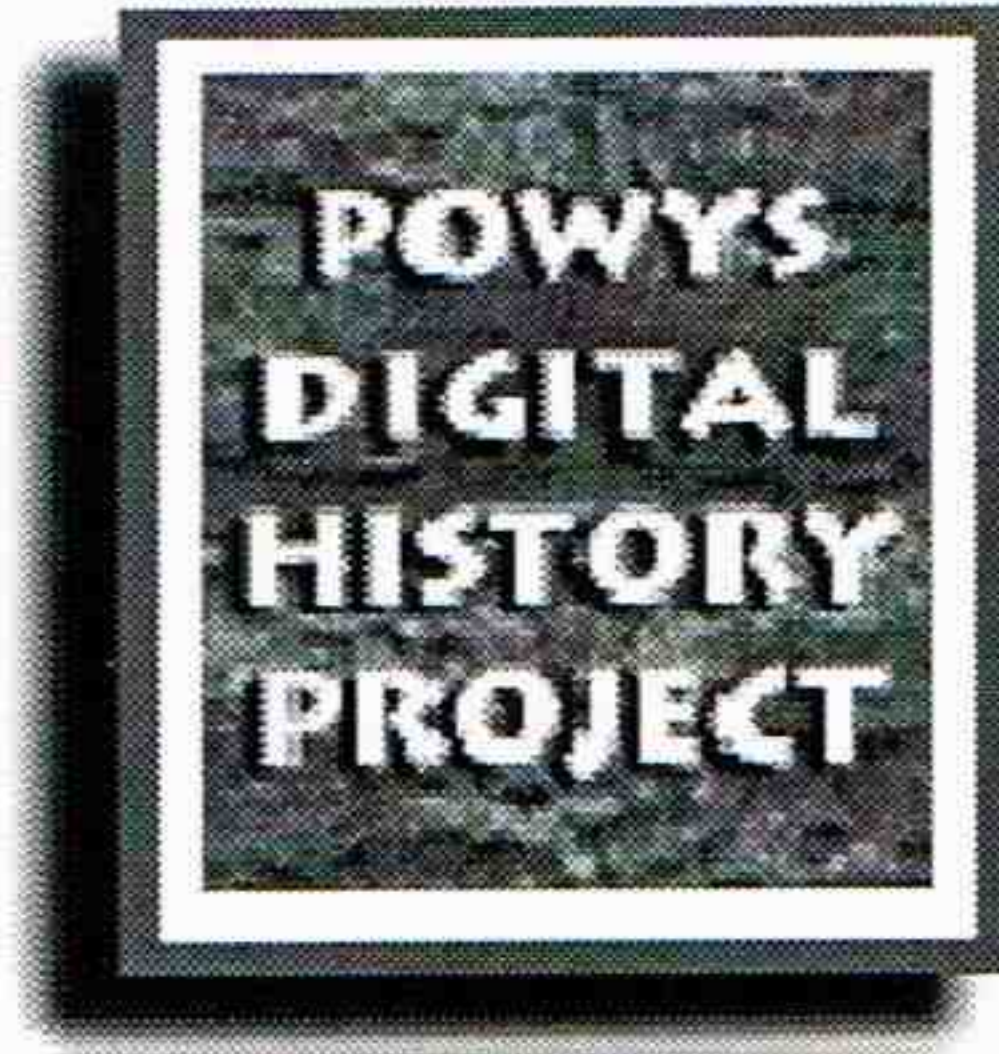
Nine hours' work in washing, scrubbing and cleaning, or needlework.

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## Workhouses 4

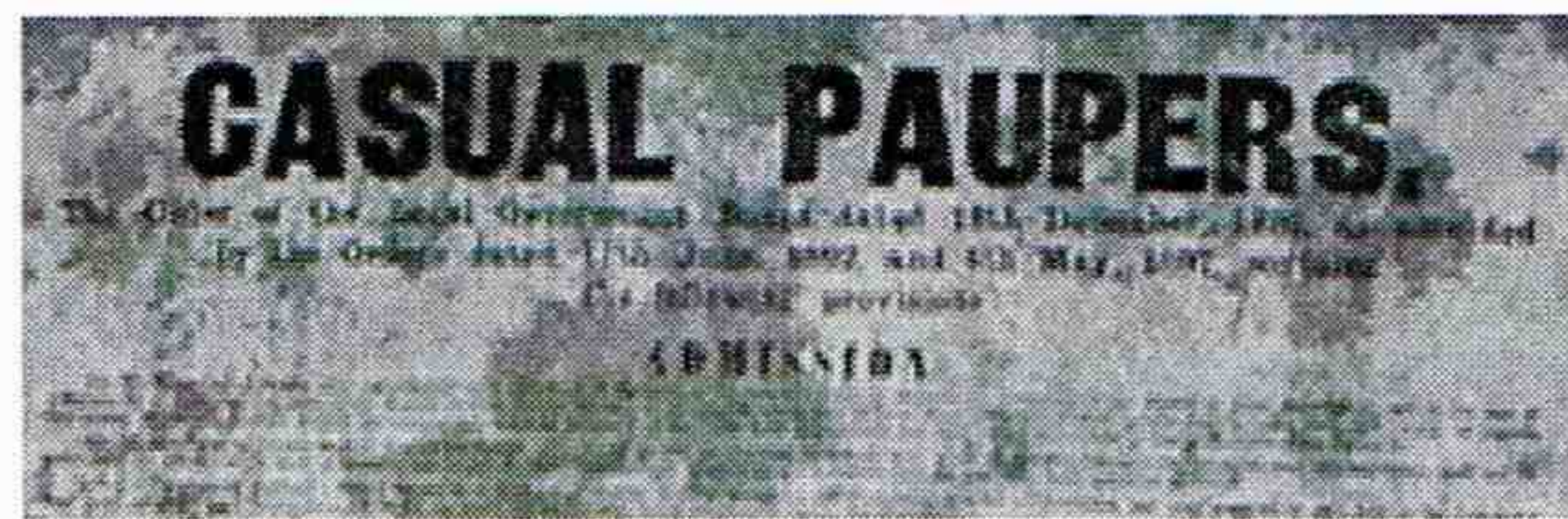
### Punishment for paupers

#### Idle and Disorderly Persons

The workhouse regulations of 1882 also set out the punishments applicable to paupers who did not adhere to the strict rules of such establishments. This part of the official notice reads as follows:

#### Punishment for Offences.

*"The Pauper Inmates Discharge and Regulation Act provides that - Any Pauper who (1) Absconds or escapes from or leaves any Casual Ward before he is entitled to discharge himself therefrom; or (2) Refuses to be removed to any Workhouse or Asylum under the*



*provisions of this Act; or (3) Absconds or escapes from or leaves any Workhouse or Asylum during the period for which he may be detained therein; or (4)*

*Refuses or neglects, whilst an inmate of any Casual Ward, Workhouse, or Asylum, to do the work or observe the regulations prescribed, or (5) Wilfully gives a false name or makes a false statement for the purpose of obtaining relief, shall be Deemed an Idle and Disorderly Person within the meaning of Section 3 of the fifth George the Fourth, chapter eighty-three.*

*And every Pauper who (1) Commits any of the offences before-mentioned after having been previously convicted as an idle and disorderly person; or (2) Wilfully destroys or injures his own clothes or damages any of the property of the Guardians, shall be deemed a Rogue and Vagabond within the meaning of Section 4 of the same Act.*

*An Idle and Disorderly Person may on conviction be sentenced to One Month's Imprisonment with hard labour.*

*A Rogue and Vagabond on conviction may be sentenced to Three Month's Imprisonment with hard labour."*

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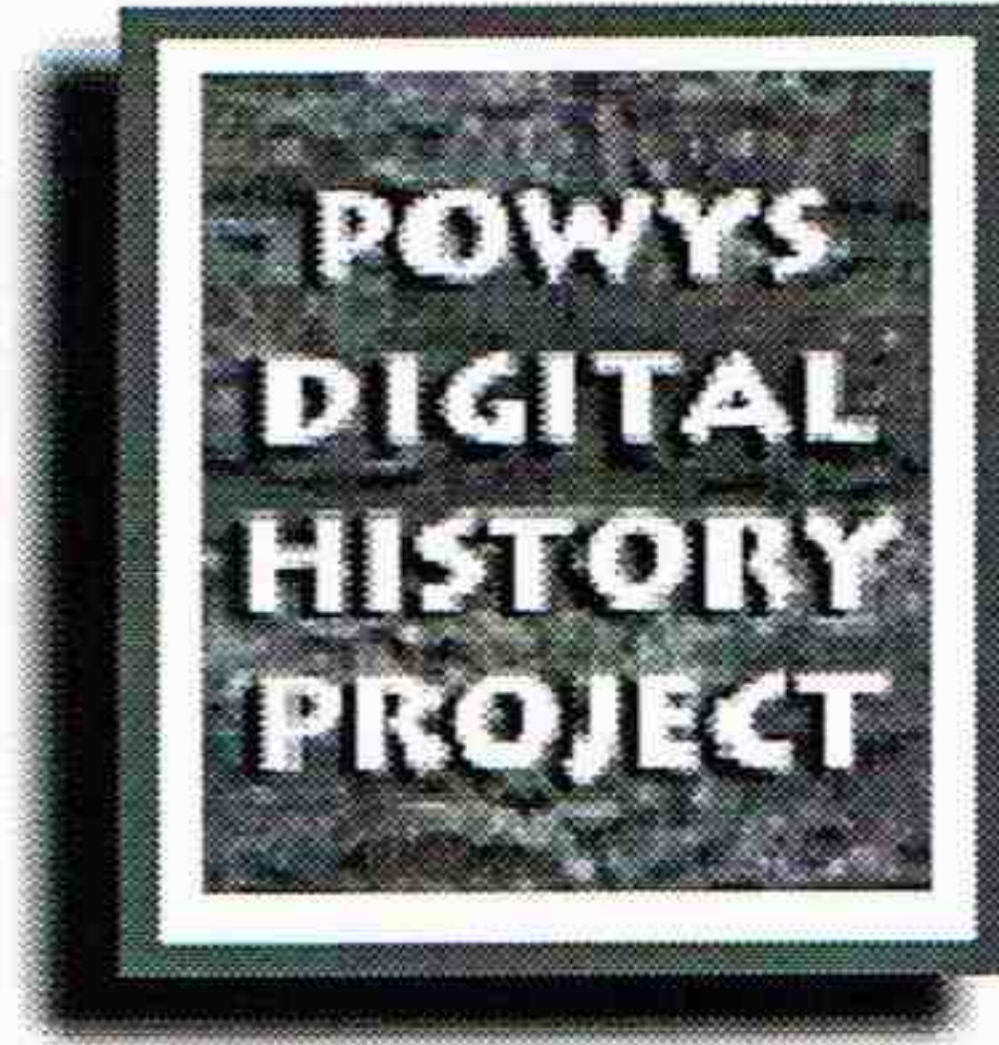
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## Workhouses 5

### The workhouse or starvation

#### The workhouse or starvation

The *Poor Law Amendment Act* of 1834 also decreed that external relief for the poor was to be stopped within two years, leaving these unfortunates with the choice of the workhouse or starvation. It was not surprising that the draconian new law caused a huge outcry, and in many areas the setting up of new workhouse unions was delayed for many years by furious opposition to the new "bastilles". The legislation had been designed to root out the "undeserving poor", but it was the genuinely deserving and most needy members of society who suffered most because of it.

Because of the levels of hostility to the new regimes, help for the poor outside the workhouse system was still carried out. After 1850 the workhouses mostly contained the "deserving poor", plus a shifting population of vagrants and "casual paupers" kept apart from the others. As the previous pages show, they were given a particularly hard time, and had to carry out stone-breaking or other tasks in payment for a bowl of gruel and a piece of bread.

"Unchaste women" were isolated and denied the tiny concessions granted to other inmates.

#### Changing attitudes towards poverty

Towards the end of the century, attitudes towards the ways in which the poorest people in society were being treated were at last changing, and conditions were slowly improving. By that time it was common for children to be taken away from workhouses and placed in

children's homes or in foster homes.



By 1900 the harshness of the workhouse system was under attack from social reformers and charities. The poor were no longer being thought of as being always responsible for their own circumstances but seen more as victims of the economic and social conditions of the times.

The extension of the vote and the election of more sympathetic MPs led to the beginning of the end of the unforgiving treatment of the poor. Today's alternative approach to social welfare was to be set in train by 1911, with the introduction of old age pensions and state benefits.

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