

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Workhouses During the Industrial Revolution

Grade Level(s): 6-9

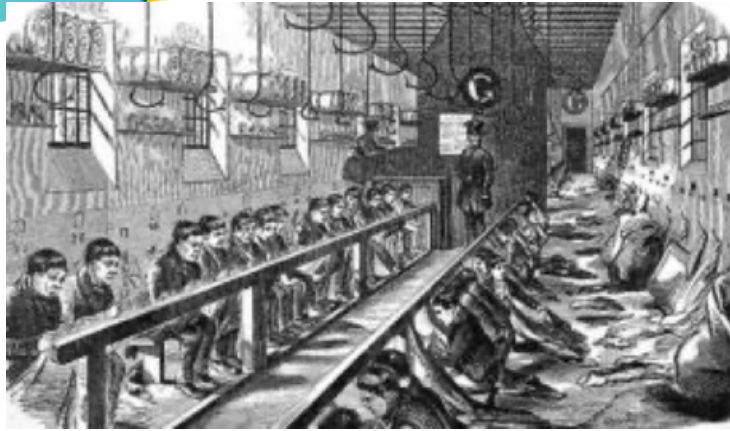
Duration: 30 minutes

Activity: Students will learn about the purpose of workhouses during the time of the Industrial Revolution.

Materials: Reading, Questions worksheet

Procedure:

1. Pass out reading material and worksheet
2. Students will read together and then answer the questions.



When he was 12 years old in 1824, Charles Dickens worked 10-hour days in a rat-infested shoe polish factory for six shillings a week. His father, mother, and five siblings were in prison because the family was in debt. In Western society, this is what happened to the poor in the mid-1800s. If people fell behind on their bills or couldn't afford to pay them, they were forced into government workhouses where they would labor to earn their keep.

Workhouses were a significant part of the social landscape during the Industrial Revolution in England. These institutions were designed to house, feed, and provide work for the poor, with the aim of dissuading people from seeking poor relief unless absolutely necessary.

The workhouses were not pleasant places. Inmates were given a variety of work, much of which involved running the workhouse itself. Women often did domestic jobs such as cleaning or helping in the kitchen or laundry. Some workhouses had workshops for sewing, spinning, weaving, or other local trades. Others had their own vegetable gardens where the inmates worked to provide food for the workhouse.

Inmates were sometimes used for agricultural labor in rural areas. Other more menial work included stone-breaking, corn-grinding, bone-crushing, gypsum-crushing, oakum-picking, and wood-chopping. These tasks were physically demanding, and the products of this labor could be sold for a profit, such as road-making materials from stone-breaking or fertilizer from bone-crushing. Leaving the workhouse was not a simple matter. Inmates had to prove they could support themselves and not become a burden on the parish again. Some were able to leave after finding employment, while others remained in the workhouse for the rest of their lives.

Questions:

1. What were workhouses?
2. What kind of work did the inmates do in the workhouses?
3. Why was the work in workhouse often physically demanding?
4. What was the purpose of the physically demanding work in the workhouses?
5. How could inmates leave the workhouses?
6. Why were some inmates unable to leave the workhouses?
7. What was the societal view of workhouses during the Industrial Revolution?
8. How did the existence of workhouses reflect the societal attitudes towards the poor during the Industrial Revolution?

Answer Key:

1. Institutions designed to house, feed, and provide work for the poor during the Industrial Revolution in England.
2. Inmates did a variety of work, including domestic jobs, local trades, agricultural labor, and menial tasks such as stone-breaking and oakum-picking.
3. The work was physically demanding because it included tasks like stone-breaking, corn-grinding, and wood-chopping, which required significant physical effort.
4. The physically demanding work served multiple purposes: it was meant to dissuade people from seeking poor relief, it helped run the workhouse itself, and the products of the labor could be sold for profit.
5. Inmates could leave the workhouse if they could prove they could support themselves and not become a burden on the parish again. Some were able to leave after finding employment.
6. Some inmates were unable to leave the workhouse because they could not find employment or otherwise prove they could support themselves.
7. Workhouses were viewed as a necessary but unpleasant part of society. They were designed to be unappealing to dissuade people from seeking poor relief unless absolutely necessary.
8. The existence of workhouses reflected societal attitudes that the poor should be made to work and support themselves and that poor relief should be a last resort. The harsh conditions in the workhouses were intended to discourage people from seeking help unless they had no other choice.