

Children in the workhouse

follow the footsteps of Mary Fielding



Disclaimer

This workbook has been created to help young readers learn about an important part of our history. It is based on historical research and records relating to workhouses in Ireland and is intended for educational and storytelling purposes only.

Some of the topics explored reflect difficult experiences from the past. These are presented in an age-appropriate and sensitive way to encourage understanding, empathy and discussion. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the book does not aim to give a complete or definitive account of historical events or individual lives.

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Leanaí i dTeach na mBocht /Children in the workhouse

Téacs/Text: Dr Gerard Moran

Dearadh grafach/Graphic design: Sara Nylund

Profáil/Proofreading: Marianne ten Cate

Aistriúchán/Translation: Europus

Arna cur i gCló ag/Printing: KPW Print Management (Ballinasloe)

Foireann an Togra/Project Team: An Dr/Dr Gerard Moran, An Dr/Dr Christy Cunniffe and Marie Mannion/ Oifigeach Oidhreachta, Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe/ Heritage Officer, Galway County Council

Bainisteoir tionscadail/Project Manager: Marie Mannion, Oifigeach Oidhreachta, Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe /Heritage Officer, Galway County Council

Tacaíocht riaracháin/ Administrative Support: An tAonad Cuimhneacháin/Commemorations Unit, An Roinn Cultúir, Cumarsáide agus Spóirt/Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, Ita Gordon, Gina O'Shaughnessy, Martina Creaven and Anne Power, Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe/Galway County Council

Assistance provided: Ann Hodgins, Martin Shiels, Donal Burke and all the staff of the Irish Workhouse Centre Portumna.

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Timeline

1838 Poor Law Act.



1847 Public Works Ended.



1840 First Workhouse Opens.



1847 Quarter Acre Clause



1841 Workhouse in Gort, Co. Galway.



1847 Crowded Workhouses.



1842 Workhouse in Ballinasloe Opens.



1848 Orphan Girls Sent to Australia.



1845 Potato Blight Reported.



1849 Auxiliary Workhouses in Ballinasloe.



1846 Potato Crop Failed.



1850 New Workhouses Planned.



1852

Workhouse in Portumna.

Numbers in Workhouse Decline.



Children in the Workhouse

During the Great Famine, thousands of children in Ireland experienced hunger, fear and loss. Many of them ended up living in workhouses, these large institutions set up by the government to provide relief for people who were poor, hungry or homeless.

For children, life in the workhouse was strict and very different from home. Families were separated. Food was scarce. Days were ruled by bells, rules and routines. Although workhouses were meant to give relief, they were often places of hardship, sickness and sorrow, especially during the worst years of the Famine.

This booklet tells the story of children in the workhouses of County Galway. It explains why workhouses were built, what daily life was like for the children who lived there, and how the Great Famine shaped their lives. Along the way, you will read real historical evidence – newspaper reports, official records and eyewitness accounts – that help you understand what happened.

Many children entered the workhouse not knowing if they would ever return home.

What was the Great Famine?

Between **1845 and 1852**, Ireland experienced one of the greatest disasters in its history. The failure of the potato crop, the main food of most people, led to widespread hunger and disease. Over one million people died and millions more were forced to leave Ireland.

Children were among the most vulnerable. Hunger affected their growth, health and education, and many were left without parents or a home. For many, the workhouse became their only place of shelter.

In the pages that follow, you will explore this history through the eyes of children.

Who was Mary Fielding?

To help you understand what life was like for children in the workhouse, this booklet follows the story of **Mary Fielding**.

Mary Fielding is a **fictional character**, but her story is based on the real experiences of thousands of children who lived in Galway workhouses during the Great Famine. Everything that happens to Mary, the rules she must follow, the food she eats, the work she must do, and the fears she faces reflects what historians know from records and eyewitness accounts.

Mary lived in the **Ballinasloe workhouse** as a child and later in the **Portumna workhouse**. Through her story, you will learn what it meant to grow up in a workhouse at a time when survival itself could never be taken for granted.

Mary's story could have been the story of many children in Galway during the Famine.

How to use this book

This workbook is designed to help you:

- learn about history through **real evidence and personal stories**
- understand how poverty and hunger affected children
- think critically by answering **CONSIDER** questions
- connect the past with the present

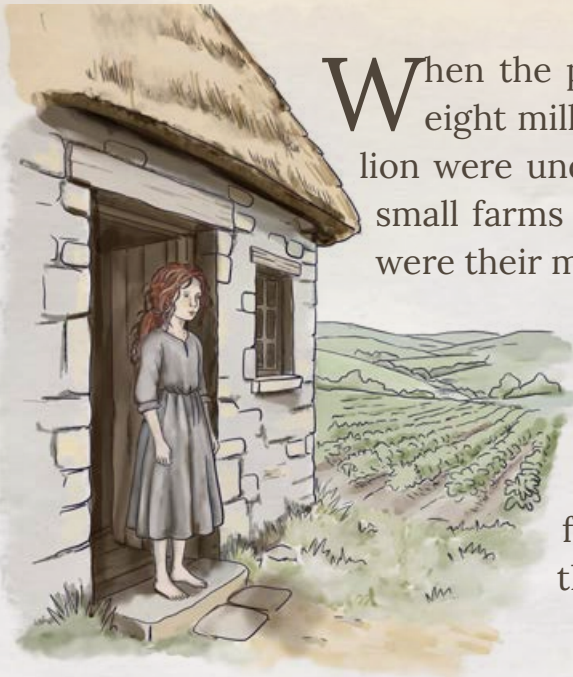
You will be asked to reflect, discuss, research and write. Some questions may feel difficult, just as the experiences of children in the past were difficult. Take your time. History is not only about facts; it is also about understanding people.

Failure of the potato crop

When the potato crop failed in 1845, there were more than eight million people living on the island of Ireland; 3.6 million were under seventeen years of age. Most people lived on small farms and rented plots of land to grow potatoes which were their main source of nutrition.

More than 40 per cent of the population depended on potatoes for their survival!

There had been years before when the potato crop failed, but families did not worry as they thought that there would be a plentiful crop the following year.



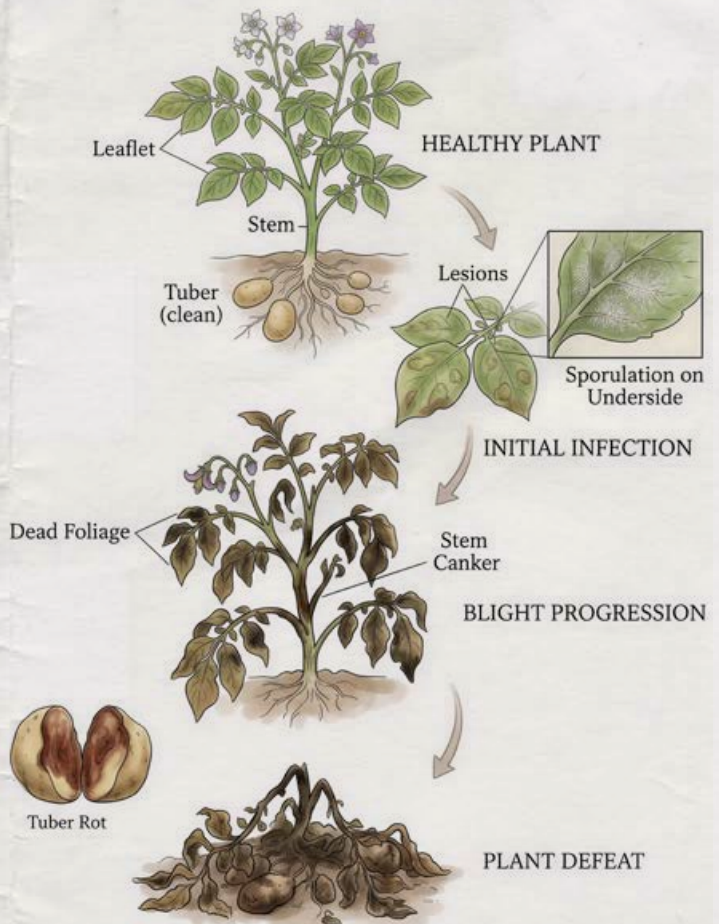
There used to be an annual shortage when the old crop was gone in May and the new crop was not dug till August.

These were called **'the Hungry Months'**. People in need could beg, depend on organisations that would help them with relief or go to the workhouse in Ballinasloe which had opened in January 1842 and was where Mary Fielding lived. She had been born near Portumna.

In 1852, along with other children, Mary was moved to the newly-opened workhouse in Portumna.

The potato crop failed between 1845 and 1852 and this seven-year period is known as **'the Great Hunger'**.

LATE POTATO BLIGHT (*Phytophthora infestans*)



CONSIDER

1. What is potato blight?
2. Find out how potato blight is dealt with today.
3. Why do you think May, June and July were called 'the Hungry months'?
4. Find out where there are famines today and what has caused them.



"We are extremely sorry to learn the worst possible accounts from every district in the neighbourhood. Potatoes which were perfectly sound when housed or pitted, are found in many instances to be damaged; the one half of them in some cases rotted and totally unfit for use."

TIPPERARY VINDICATOR

"Large quantities of potatoes have, on examination afterwards, been unfit for use. So general is that we have heard some gentlemen of experience ... say that they greatly fear there will hardly be a sound potato in the county in a month or two."

MAYO CONSTITUTION



Start of the workhouses

The workhouses were opened to take in people who were extremely poor (destitute), and had no place else to go to.



Of the 130 workhouses in the country, six were in County Galway and they could look after 100,000 people. The first workhouse in County Galway was opened in Gort in December 1841 and it could accommodate 500 people, also known as paupers or inmates.

The Ballinasloe workhouse had places for 1,000 paupers.

People did not want to go into the workhouses because conditions were worse than on the outside. They were grey, dismal stone buildings surrounded by a large wall.

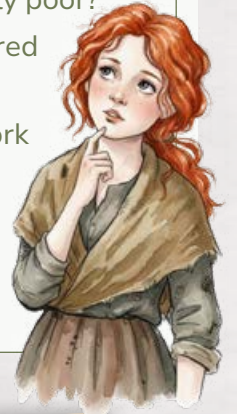
Families were separated when they entered the workhouse: men and women were put in separate wards, children of two to nine years of age went to the nursery, while boys and girls from ten to fifteen years were kept in separate dormitories.

Babies up to two years stayed with their mother, but parents had very little contact with their older children in the workhouse.

Workhouse rules wanted no contact between parents and children as it was believed that this would prevent the children also becoming paupers when they were adults. As Mary Fielding was ten years old, she was in the girls' ward.

CONSIDER

1. Do you think the Ballinasloe workhouse had enough places for the extremely poor?
2. Can you think of any reasons why the family was separated when they entered the workhouse?
3. How would you have felt if you were separated from your family in the workhouse?
4. What does it tell us about being poor and destitute at that time?
5. Can you think of any reasons why people did not want to go into the workhouse?



"Since our last Report, the Guardians of the Tuam, Castlereagh, Cahirciveen and Clifden Unions have opened their respective workhouses for the relief of the poor, and a rate has now been made in the Clifden Union. All the workhouses in Ireland, therefore, are now opened for the relief of the poor, and there is no union in which a rate has not been made."

POOR LAW COMMISSIONERS REPORT, 1847

"In this workhouse there at present 1,080 paupers, but the last 434 were admitted in so hurried a manner that there is neither bedding for clothes for them. It is probable there will be frightful mortality among the inmates. In the children's room was collected a miserable crowd of wretched objects, the charm of infancy having entirely disappeared and in its place were to be seen wan and haggard faces, presumably old from the effects of hunger, cold, rags and dirt. In the school room they spend some hours every day in hopeless, listless idleness."

JOSEPH CROSSFIELD



A sleeping area in a ruined workhouse; note the platforms on either side of the aisle where the straw mats used to be. Source: Adobe Stock

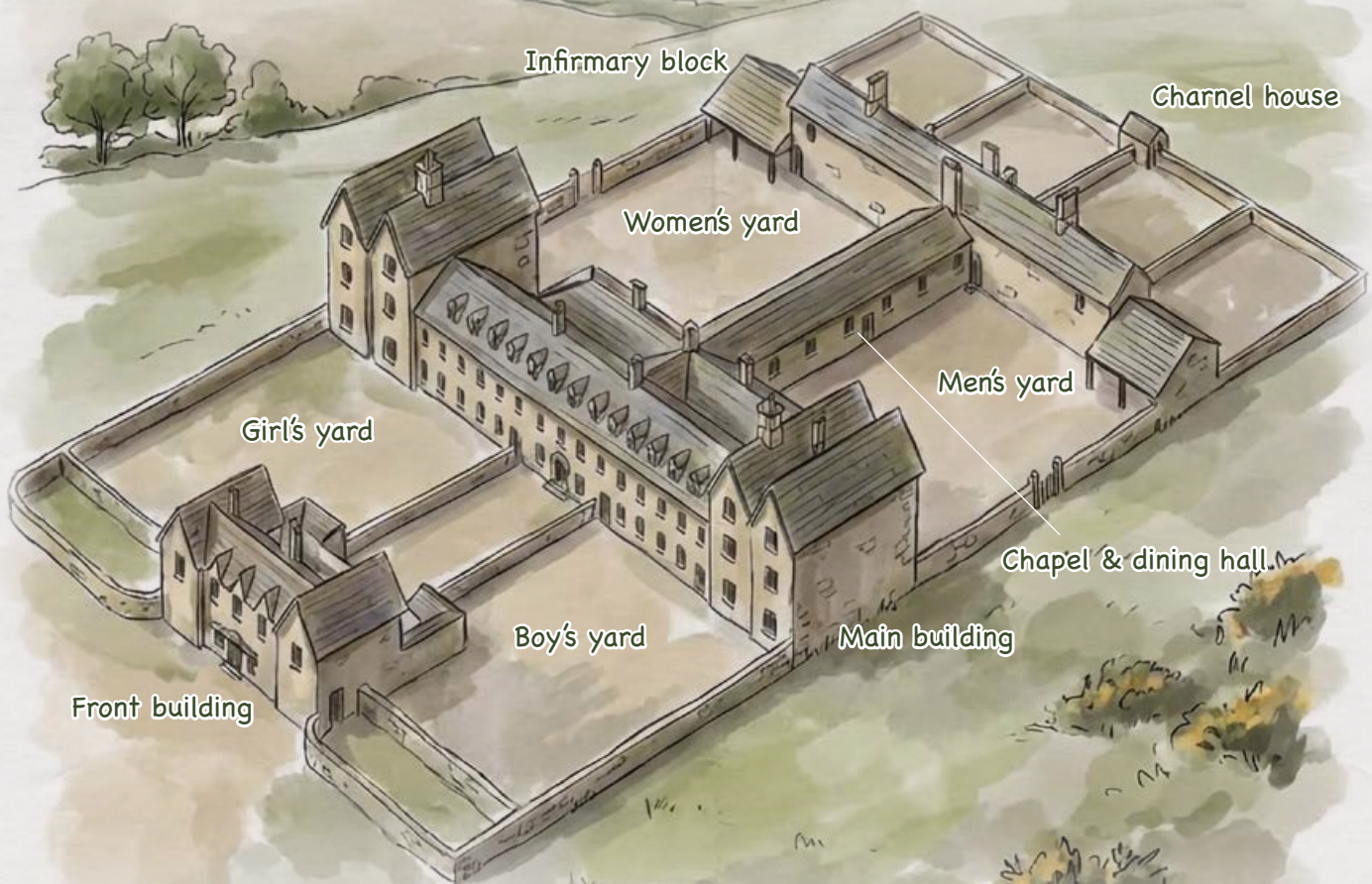
The workhouse

The workhouse was a cold and dreary place with stone walls. Even the main rooms and dormitories were cold. The cheapest materials were put into the building, with no decorations or ornaments.

All the workhouses were built to the same design, with walls of limestone masonry and the inside walls white-washed but not plastered. The floors were cold as they were of clay and mortar. Only the bare essentials were in the building.

The wards were large, the walls were not plastered and there were no ceilings, so that the inmates were looking up at the bare rafters. There were no beds in the wards and the paupers slept on straw mattresses spread on a platform. There were two raised platforms on either side of a gangway. This was done to double sleeping space.

Sample layout of a workhouse



The stairways to the wards were steep and narrow and made of stone. The only heat came from an open fireplace stoked by turf. Meals were eaten at long wooden tables. There were no toilet facilities in the dormitories except two large tubs in each ward which led to a constant bad smell, made even worse because of the poor ventilation. Boys over the age of nine had to empty these tubs. The workhouses were said to be always dirty and filthy.



CONSIDER

1. Why do you think the cheapest materials were put into the workhouses?
2. What are the main features that you would dislike about the workhouse and is there anything you would like?
3. Describe the toilet facilities and what problems they would create?
4. Is there any way that the workhouses could have been improved for the paupers?
5. Describe the reaction of a child when he/she entered the workhouse and was separated from its parents and siblings.



"The style of building is intended to be of the cheapest description comparable with durability, and effect is aimed at harmony of proportion and simplicity or arrangement, all mere decoration being studiously excluded."

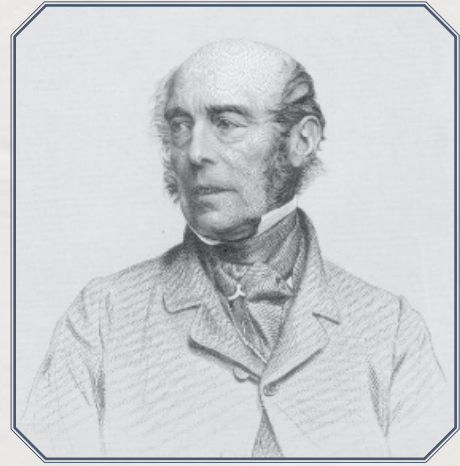
POOR LAW COMMISSIONERS REPORT, 1839

"We visited the poor house in Glenties, which is in a dreadful state; the people were in fact half-starved and half-clothed. The day before they had one meal of oatmeal and water, and at the time of our visit had not sufficient food in the house for the day's supply. The rooms are hardly bearable for filth."

JAMES HACK TUKE

The Board of Guardians

The people in charge of the Poor Law and workhouses were **the guardians**. They were elected each year by the people who paid the rates (taxation) which provided the funds to run the workhouse. There was also a group of guardians (*ex officio*) who were not elected and were magistrates. People had to have a certain amount of land before they could become guardians. They were mainly landowners and their agents, well-off farmers, shopkeepers and merchants.



Lord Clanricarde - Wikipedia commons

One of the guardians was chosen to be chairman for the meetings and in Portumna this was Lord Clanricarde, the largest landowners in the region. The guardians set the rate that the ratepayers had to pay for the upkeep of the workhouse and they selected the workhouse staff.

They held meetings once a week, but when the potato crops failed, they had to have more meetings, sometimes four to five times a week, dealing with issues in the workhouse and the level of deaths and starvation in the area.



Many guardians lived far away from the workhouse and found it difficult to attend the meetings on a regular basis. The workhouse paupers had very little contact with the guardians.

CONSIDER

1. How important was the role of the guardians?
2. What were the advantages and disadvantages of having elected guardians?
3. What problems were there with the guardians choosing the staff of the workhouses?
4. What were the reasons why some guardians only came to occasional meetings?
5. Find out how county councils are funded today and if it is a fair system?

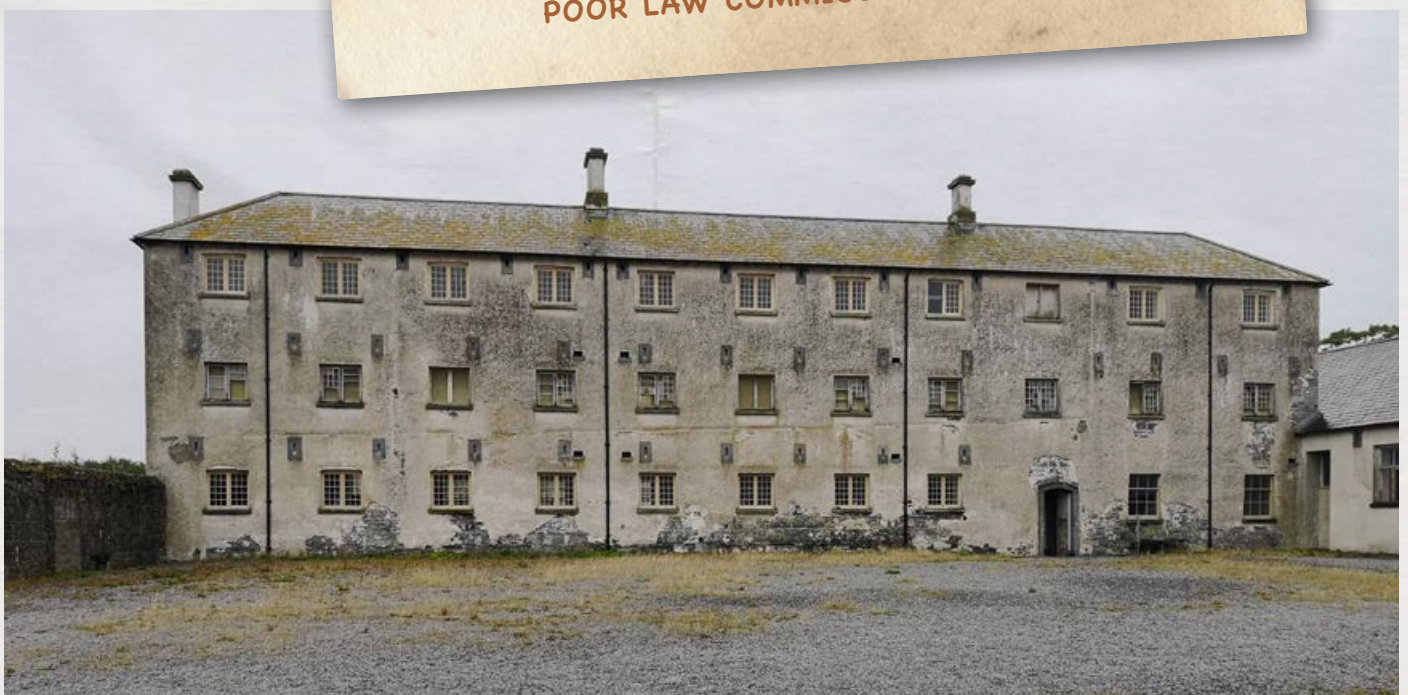


"... in the board room of the workhouse three of the guardians were stricken with fever on the same day, and it was afterwards observed that they sat at a particular niche of the room in a draft of air."

DUBLIN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF MEDICAL SCIENCE

"The power of affording relief from the poor rates being limited by law to accommodation in workhouses, such power could only be relied on to a small extent for relieving the destitution of the people."

POOR LAW COMMISSIONERS REPORT, 1846



Portumna workhouse. Source: Wikipedia commons

Funding the workhouses

The money to fund the workhouses came from rates which people with property paid according to the value of their land. Farmers with very small farms did not have to pay rates. This created problems for the funding of the workhouses in the poorer areas of Ireland. When the potato crop failed and the number of paupers coming into the workhouses increased, more money was needed to look after those in the workhouse. As ratepayers were struggling to pay the rates, they were unhappy having to pay more.

Many refused to pay their rates.

It meant that workhouses had difficulty providing the same level of food and care to people like Mary Fielding and the other workhouse paupers. Often, the authorities had to send the police to force ratepayers to pay what they owed.



Some workhouses depended on the local landlord to pay for the food that was needed, but they were unable to do this long term. The poorest workhouses were also assisted by money from the British Relief Association. Otherwise, they would have had to close and turn out the paupers.

CONSIDER

1. Do you think, it was a fair system that people had to pay for the upkeep of the workhouse paupers?
2. Are there any other ways that the workhouses could have been funded?
3. Why would ratepayers have been unwilling to pay increased rates?
4. Why would there have been a reluctance to close the workhouses and put out the paupers?
5. Find out how poor people get help today.

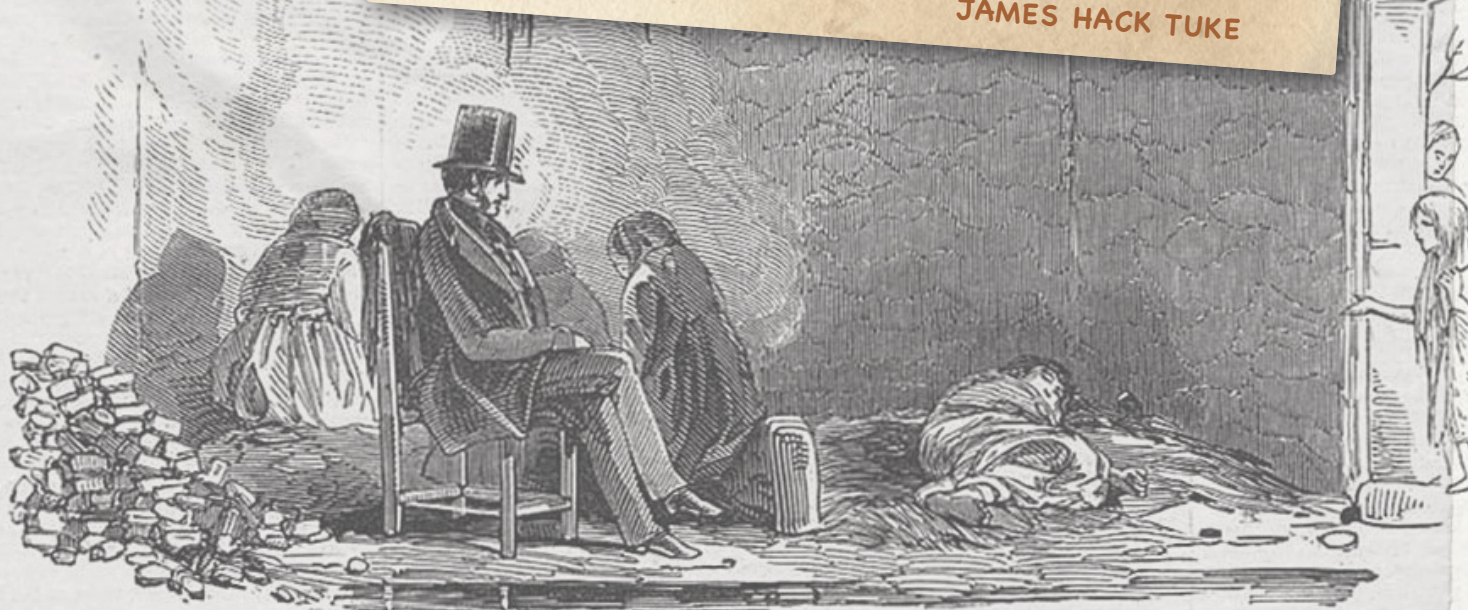


"We saw hundreds of people crawling in from the countryside, with assess carrying the children and cripples, old men and women. They numbered at that time about 3,000 people. It is surprising that so many asses have survived. A gloom hangs over the town. And this hunger outside the workhouse is only a drop in the ocean. Many never made it to the workhouse. The many thousands brought to the workhouse screaming for food couldn't be relieved. Many were buried where they fell."

JAMES HACK TUKE

"Gates were besieged by seventy or eighty wretched beings who in vain implored for admission. Numbers of them were in various stages of fever."

JAMES HACK TUKE



The Famine; Mullins' Hut at Scull at Cahera, Co. Cork. Courtesy of James Mahony 1847

The workhouse staff

The boards of guardians employed staff to look after the running of the workhouse and the paupers.



- **The master** controlled all aspects of life in the building. He was very strict and even adult paupers were afraid of him. He punished paupers who broke the workhouse rules. One pauper was sent to the cell for tearing his workhouse blanket. At times, the master was seen to be drunk and this was when the children were scared.

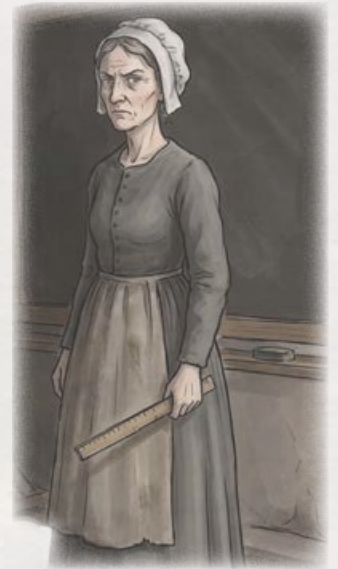
- **The matron** was in charge of the women and girls' wards, and she punished the inmates if they broke the rules. Some matrons were nice to the children, but others could be cruel and made the lives of the paupers very difficult. There were a few matrons in the workhouse where Mary Fielding was: some were dismissed, while others left to take up positions in other workhouses.



- **The clerk** looked after the administration and had little contact with the inmates.



- **The school master** was in charge of teaching the boys and could be harsh in the way he treated them.

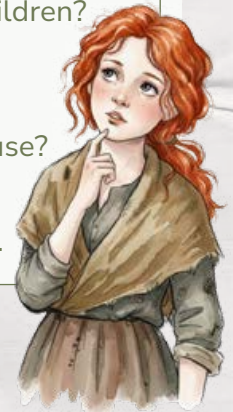


- **The school mistress** taught the girls and punished them if they broke the rules.

The workhouse staff took over the role of parents, but without the same level of compassion and affection. They provided only the basic needs for children to stay alive.

CONSIDER

1. Why were the master and matron so cruel to paupers and particularly to children?
2. Can you give reasons why the master and matron were constantly being replaced?
3. Why would people want the positions of master and matron in the workhouse?
4. In your opinion, would some of the staff have helped the paupers and why?
5. Write an account of a pauper in a classroom and what they saw around them.



"In the adjoining Union, Ballina, 200 were admitted to the workhouse beyond the number it was built for (1,200). Hundreds were refused admission for want of room and 1,138 died in the workhouse; the medical officer of the workhouse was also carried off. In another adjoining Union, Ballinasloe, all the officers of the workhouse were swept away, and 254 inmates of the workhouse perished.

JAMES HACK TUKE

"The workhouses are full and the people are turned away to perish. It is impossible to allow this state of things to continue without making some effectual effort to relieve it. The mortality in the workhouse is rapidly increasing, both from the crowded state of the unions and the exhausted state in which the applicants are received."

HENRY LABOUCHERE

Workhouse rules

There were strict and harsh rules that adults and children had to conform to while they were in the workhouse.

The following were punishable offences:

- Using certain language
- Using insulting behaviour
- Talking back to the master and matron out of turn
- Not doing what the staff told them
- Refusing to work
- Absconding from the workhouse
- Making unnecessary noise
- Disturbing other paupers during prayers
- Using tobacco and alcohol
- Playing cards

Discipline and control of the paupers' behaviour was regarded as necessary to keep order in the workhouse. Some workhouses had a more severe set of rules than others, depending on the attitude and approach of the master and matron. A roll call was called at breakfast to see who was present and who had left the workhouse during the night. Prayers were said during breakfast.



Adults and children had to form a line for their food and everyone had to be silent. Food was weighed at meal time to ensure that all paupers got what they were entitled to.

In some workhouses the food was eaten from a wooden or tin plate, in others it was eaten from the bare table.

Inmates could not go to the dormitories until bed time.

CONSIDER

1. Which of these rules was the hardest, in your opinion?
2. What do you think was the reason why there were so many rules?
3. Why do you think the paupers were not allowed to talk at meal time?
4. Why had the food to be weighed for each pauper?
5. Write a paragraph about what a young person would have felt about the workhouse rules?



"Bedding consisted of dirty straw in which the inmates were laid in rows on the floor - even as many as six persons being crowded under the rug. The living and the dying were stretched side by side beneath the same miserable covering."

JAMES HACK TUKE

"We saw hundreds of people crawling in from the countryside, with asses carrying in baskets starved children and crippled old men and women. They numbered at that time about 3,000 people."

JAMES HACK TUKE



Discipline

Both adults and children were subjected to harsh discipline when they broke the workhouse rules. The workhouse staff used corporal punishment on children for the most serious offence. The master of Glenamaddy workhouse severely beat two pauper children for very minor offences. The paupers who broke the rules were punished in a number of ways:

- **food portions and milk were stopped or greatly reduced depending on the offence;**
- **for serious offences inmates could be sent to a cell (solitary confinement), where they received little food and could not talk to anybody;**
- **for serious misbehaviour they were sent to the courts (Petty' Sessions) where they could be given a prison sentence of up to twenty-eight days.**



For many paupers, the discipline in the workhouse was like being in a prison: rules could not be broken and the punishments were harsh. Some people preferred to commit a crime and be sent to prison rather than go to the workhouse.

CONSIDER

1. Do you think that the discipline was harsh in the workhouse?
2. Why do you think they used food as a punishment against paupers?
3. What do you think is the harshest of the sanctions and why?
4. Why would people want to go to prison rather than enter the workhouse?
5. Find out what happens to pupils in your school that disobey the rules.



"...we look upon it as morally impossible they can ever succeed in appeasing the wants of the thousands of applicants which every day throng the precincts of the poor house."

MAYO TELEGRAPH

"On the dreadful 10th November, 120 were admitted beyond the regular number. Hundreds were refused admission for want of room, some unhappy being pushed on the high road, and in the fields ... In the Union 367 people died in the workhouse; the master also died'.

JAMES HACK TUKE



Ballinasloe workhouse. Courtesy of Damian Mac Con Uladh

Food

Mary Fielding and the other children were always hungry as they did not get enough to eat in the workhouse.

They were given two meals a day, breakfast and dinner, but there were times when these were not given and they were never told why.



Breakfast was at 8 o'clock and consisted of four ounces of bread and half a pint of milk. Sometimes they were given stirabout and milk, but this was poorly cooked and often was dry without any liquid; the children had difficulty eating it. When times were bad, they were given gruel (watery porridge).



For dinner they got two pounds of potatoes and half a pint of milk, but often Indian meal was given instead of potatoes. Indian meal is not entirely suitable in a child's diet as it needs to be pre-soaked and boiled for long to be softened before

it can be eaten. It often led to children suffering stomach problems. When they got soup, it had little nutritional value as it consisted of only meal and water.



The biggest problem was the quality and quantity of milk they received. Milk is important in a child's development as it provides protein and vitamin A.

There were weeks when Mary and the other children did not get milk or it was watered down and had chalk added to make it look white. As their diet was not nutritious enough, many children did not develop as they should have.

CONSIDER

1. Do you think the food the paupers received was enough to live on?
2. Compare what children were given for breakfast and what they get today
3. Why is milk so important in our diet?
4. What does it tell us about the milk that pauper children received?
5. Find out why food is used as a weapon against people during a war.



The soup "is nothing more than meal and water without either pepper or vegetables of any kind ... and I strongly recommend that the necessary addition be made in the preparation of it, or that it be done away with."

ENNISTYMON POOR LAW MINUTE BOOK

"The absurdity of Boards of Guardians not having the power, under the law, to give relief, even in food, out of the workhouse, though it might be crowded to excess, was too glaring, and the Irish law is now assimilated more to the English system, which Heaven knows, is harsh and restrictive enough."

ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, 1847



Huge famine pot, found not far from Lough Eske, Co. Donegal. Source: Adobe Stock

Black '47

After 1847, the number of adults and children entering the workhouses increased greatly because landlords started evicting families from their farms when they were unable to pay the rent.

In June 1847, the government passed a clause of law which said that farmers with a farm over one-quarter of an acre of land would no longer be regarded as destitute and could no longer apply for relief.



Three policemen oversee an eviction: note how the furniture was thrown out of the house. Courtesy of Lawrence Collection, National Library of Ireland

This was known as the 'Quarter Acre Clause'

The government also stopped the Public Works which gave employment to the poor who were now left with nothing. Between 1847 and 1852, over 250,000 people were

turned out of their homes, had no place to shelter and came into the workhouses. Parents brought their children to the workhouses so they would have food, shelter and clothing.

Conditions for children and adults got worse as the workhouses were unable to cope with the numbers wanting to be admitted. While many hated coming to the workhouse, they had no other choice.

One day in June 1851, there were over 261,000 people in the workhouses.



CONSIDER

1. Why do you think this period is called 'Black '47'?
2. What choices did those families have that were evicted?
3. Why did landlords start evicting families from their farms in 1847?
4. Do you think the workhouses were the suitable place for evicted families to go to and why?
5. Find out what happens to families who have to leave their homes today.



"No mercy was displayed towards any one of the besieged; one man in the convulsive pangs of death, was thrown out to the open air, and in an hour or two, death put an end to his miserable existence."

MAYO TELEGRAPH

"No person who shall be in occupation of any land of greater extent than statute acres shall be deemed to be a destitute person, and it shall not be lawful for any Board of Guardians to grant relief within or out of the workhouse, to any such person."

QUARTER ACRE CLAUSE, 1847



Scene at the gate of a Workhouse. Credit: Edward Duncan, illustrator at *Illustrated London News*, 1847

Auxiliary (extra) workhouses

With the massive increase in the numbers entering the workhouses after 1847, they were unable to deal with the influx and, in some cases, refused to admit women and children. There were also cases where mothers and their children were asked to leave the workhouse.

The only solution to deal with the great increase in the numbers of paupers being admitted was for the guardians to rent buildings to house women and in particular children. These buildings were called auxiliary workhouses and could be corn stores, stables, breweries and any other building that was available.

They were totally unsuitable for habitation, let alone sheltering vulnerable children. They did not have proper fresh air coming into the building, did not stop the rain coming in and, in some cases, the roof was blown off in a storm. There were no areas inside or outside these buildings where children could play.



The children had to sleep in these buildings and in the morning were sent to school in the main workhouse.

Conditions in the auxiliary workhouses were worse than in the main buildings. Mary Fielding spent part of her time in one of the auxiliary buildings in Ballinasloe along with 400 other girls, before being sent to the new workhouse in Portumna in 1852. She was happier in Portumna, where conditions were grim, but better than in the auxiliary workhouse.

There were fourteen auxiliary workhouses in Ballinasloe.

CONSIDER

1. Why do you think, those extra buildings were called 'auxiliary workhouses'?
2. What does it tell us about the workhouse system when additional buildings had to be rented?
3. From what you have read, do you think the auxiliary workhouses were better than the main buildings?
4. Can you think of reasons why women and children, rather than adult men, were sent to the auxiliary workhouses?
5. Write a report of what life was like in an auxiliary workhouse.



"Turf is most irregularly supplied; on many days not at all sent, the cause of having the breakfast meal deferred to one or two o'clock, p.m. On New Year's Day the paupers had only one meal, and that at a late hour. The master states that he is obliged to permit the paupers to continue in their beds for heat's sake. The hospital is occupied by the old men, and the children pining away by hunger and cold. Coffins with difficulty procured for those who die."

PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS, 1847

"Never did I visit any dungeon, any abode of crime or misery, in any country, which left the same crushing sense of sorrow, indignation and compassion - almost despair."

MRS JAMESON



Many poor children grew up in very remote places like this; imagine how they felt in the overcrowded workhouse. Source: Adobe stock

Work in the workhouses

Adults were expected to work in the workhouses to pay towards their keep. However, the type of work done was limited because what was produced was not allowed to compete with outside businesses. Men were expected to break stone using hammers, which was tiring and exhausting work. There were farms attached to some workhouses where men grew vegetables which were used in the workhouse kitchens.

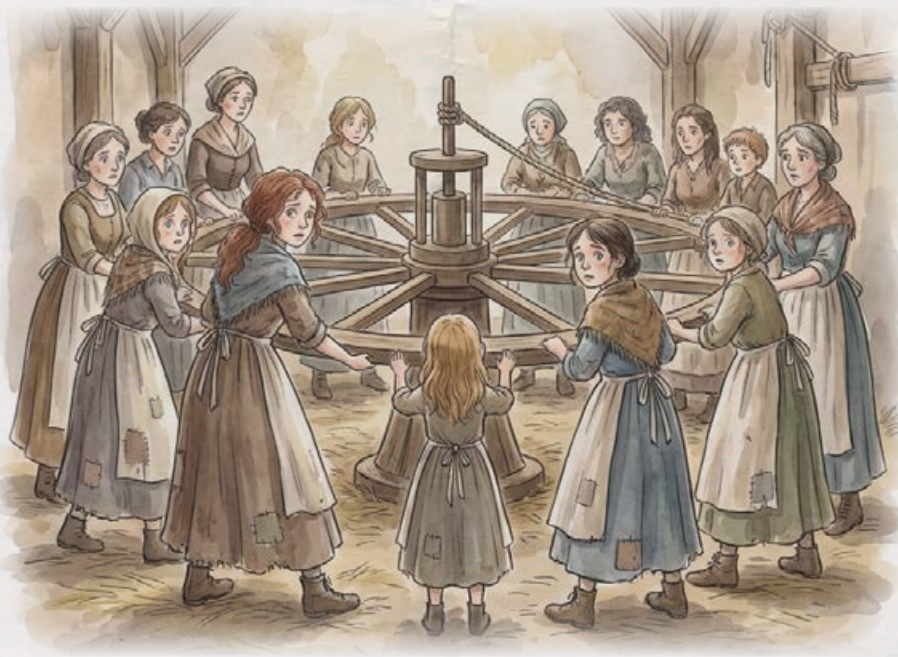


Women were given jobs cleaning, preparing and serving food and looking after children.

Stirabout for breakfast was made in large vats that were not cleaned properly and soup was then made in them for lunch.

Some workhouses bought a capstan mill which was used to grind grain and was powered by women who pushed it round in a circle for up to eight hours a day. This was exhausting work.

Overall, there was not enough work for women paupers and they were left bored and demoralised as they had little to do from the time they got up at 7 o'clock till they went to bed at 8 o'clock. It was a long day with little to do.



CONSIDER

1. Why, do you think, were the paupers expected to work in the workhouses?
2. Can you think of reasons why workhouses were not allowed to compete with outside industries?
3. What reasons can you think of why women did not like working the capstan mill?
4. Why were children and the other paupers bored in the workhouse?
5. Write a diary entry of what work was like in the workhouse.

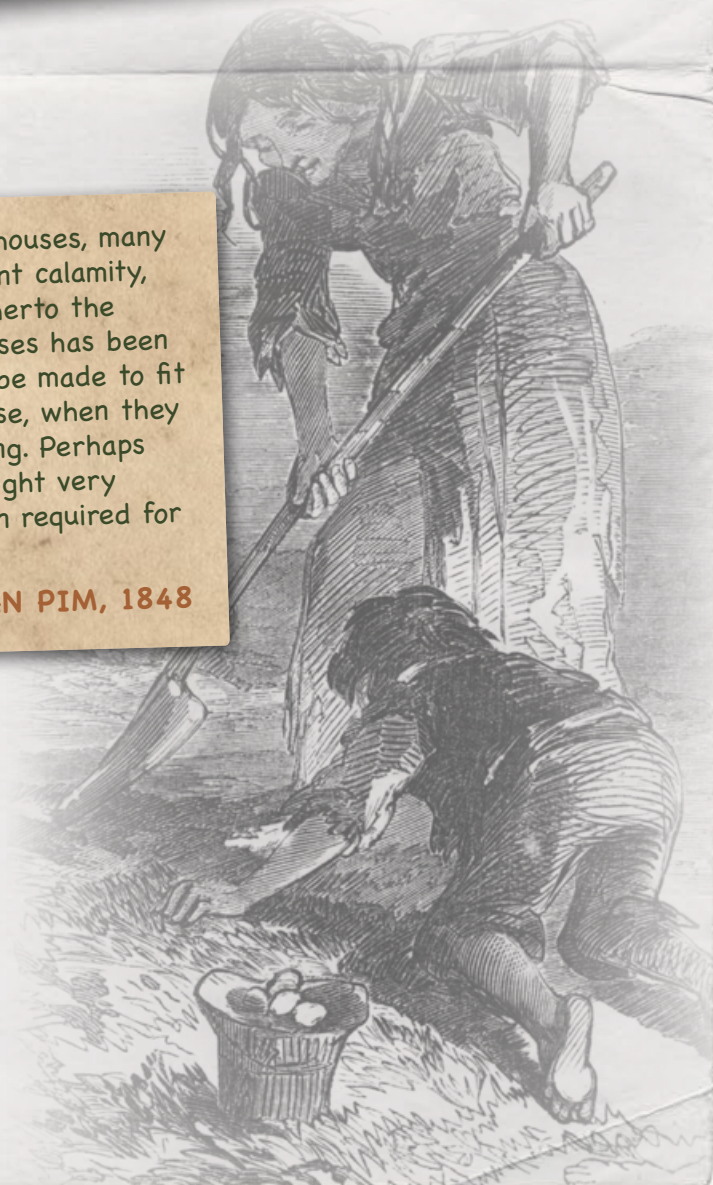


"Stern necessity, to a considerable degree, overcame the strong prejudices of the people to enter these workhouses and they are now generally full; the prejudices of the population to a workhouse were so deep and inveterate that the workhouse was a long time before one pauper could be induced to enter it. Famine, however, came on with such relenting severity that in a short time, the workhouse was filled with the numbers it was intended for."

JAMES HACK TUKE

"The situation of the poor children in the workhouses, many of whom have been made orphans by the present calamity, most imperatively calls for public attention. Hitherto the education given in the majority of the workhouses has been very defective. It is evident that efforts must be made to fit the youthful inmates for earning a living; or, else, when they leave the workhouse, they will be fit for nothing. Perhaps regular instruction in some handicraft trade, might very usefully form a part of the course of education required for these children."

JONATHAN PIM, 1848



A starving woman during the Irish Famine.
Source: *Illustrated London News*, 1849

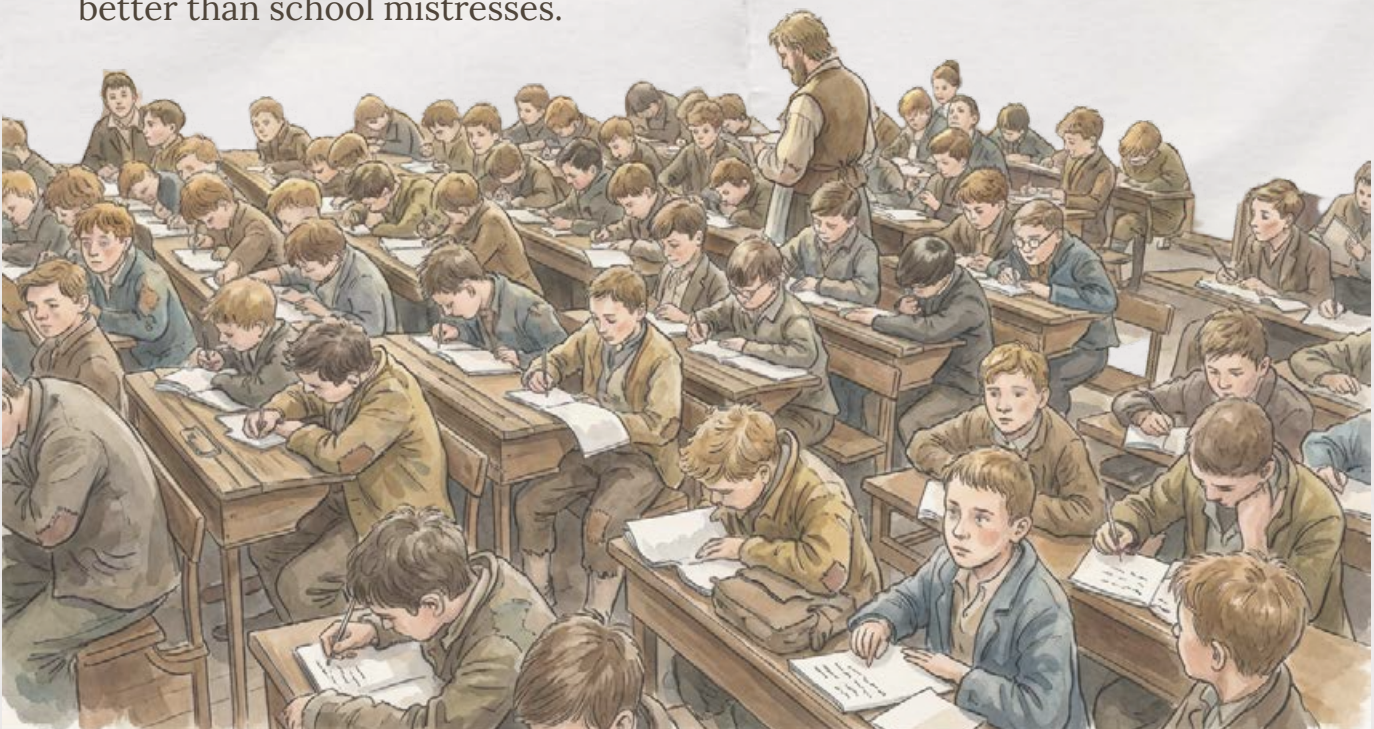
School

Children in the workhouse attended the workhouse school and were given a basic education. The Poor Law intended that all the children got an education, however meagre. This would allow them have better job prospects when they left the workhouse and they would have the basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic.

Again, boys were separated from girls, each with their own classroom. As the number of children in the workhouse increased, the numbers being taught were large and there were not enough slates for children to practise their writing skills. As well as attending school, both boys and girls spent time learning other skills. Girls were sent to spinning and sewing rooms and boys were taught tailoring, shoemaking and carpentry.

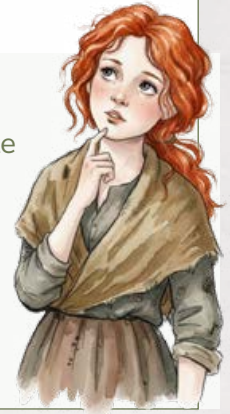
Children were given a basic education in the workhouse and it was better than they would have received on the outside because of the famine.

The teachers were not well paid and often the pay had to come from outside contributions. Many of the teachers were not trained and only got the positions as they were friendly with or related to Poor Law Guardians. Teachers left the workhouse when they could get better-paid jobs, which meant that students could have a few different teachers over the course of a year. Schoolmasters were paid better than school mistresses.



CONSIDER

1. Why was it important that children were given a basic education?
2. Can you think of any reason why the boys and girls were kept in separate classrooms?
3. What does it tell us about the teachers who worked in the workhouse?
4. Were there any problems that children faced in the class room?
5. Describe the differences between what students had in the workhouse classroom and what you have today at school?



Any system of mere literary instruction pursued by pauper children would in itself be incomplete; the majority are deprived of guardianship by their parents."

PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS, 1847

[The diet] "would in my opinion not keep them [children] in vigorous health. On the contrary, it would reduce their bodies into that state that they would easily become the victims to disease."

DR W. TOWNSEND



A classroom in the workhouse. Source: Adobe Stock

Training in the workhouse

As children and young adults spent a long time in the workhouse and got beyond the school age. They were given training.

Shoemakers, carpenters, millers and those who were skilled in embroidery were brought in to teach young adults their skills. However, as there were too many young people to train, there were many who got no training.

It was claimed that girls were not taught the most basic housekeeping and servant skills and that, as a result, they could not get jobs outside the workhouse.

Some workhouses sought places that young adults could be sent to for work. Boys in the Ballinasloe workhouse were sent to join the British Navy when they came of age, while others were sent to factories in Yorkshire where the owners had agreed to give them jobs in the woollen and cotton mills.



Mary Fielding hoped that she would learn a skill when she finished her schooling so that she could get a position outside the workhouse.

CONSIDER

1. Why was it important that young people in the workhouse were taught a trade?
2. Can you think of reasons why employers were reluctant to employ young workhouse paupers?
3. What does the information tell us about children and women in the workhouse?
4. How would children and young women have coped when they left the workhouse?
5. Find out how students at school today get training for work and what are the practical subjects taught at school?



"It has long been felt both by Government and by ourselves that no part of the education of the poor required more decisive improvement than the instruction of pauper children in workhouse schools."

PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS, 1847

"They acquire no knowledge of any kind of household work; they have nothing to do but attend to meals or their schools; they take what is given them, and do not know where it came from, how it is cooked, or its cost."

PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS, 1861

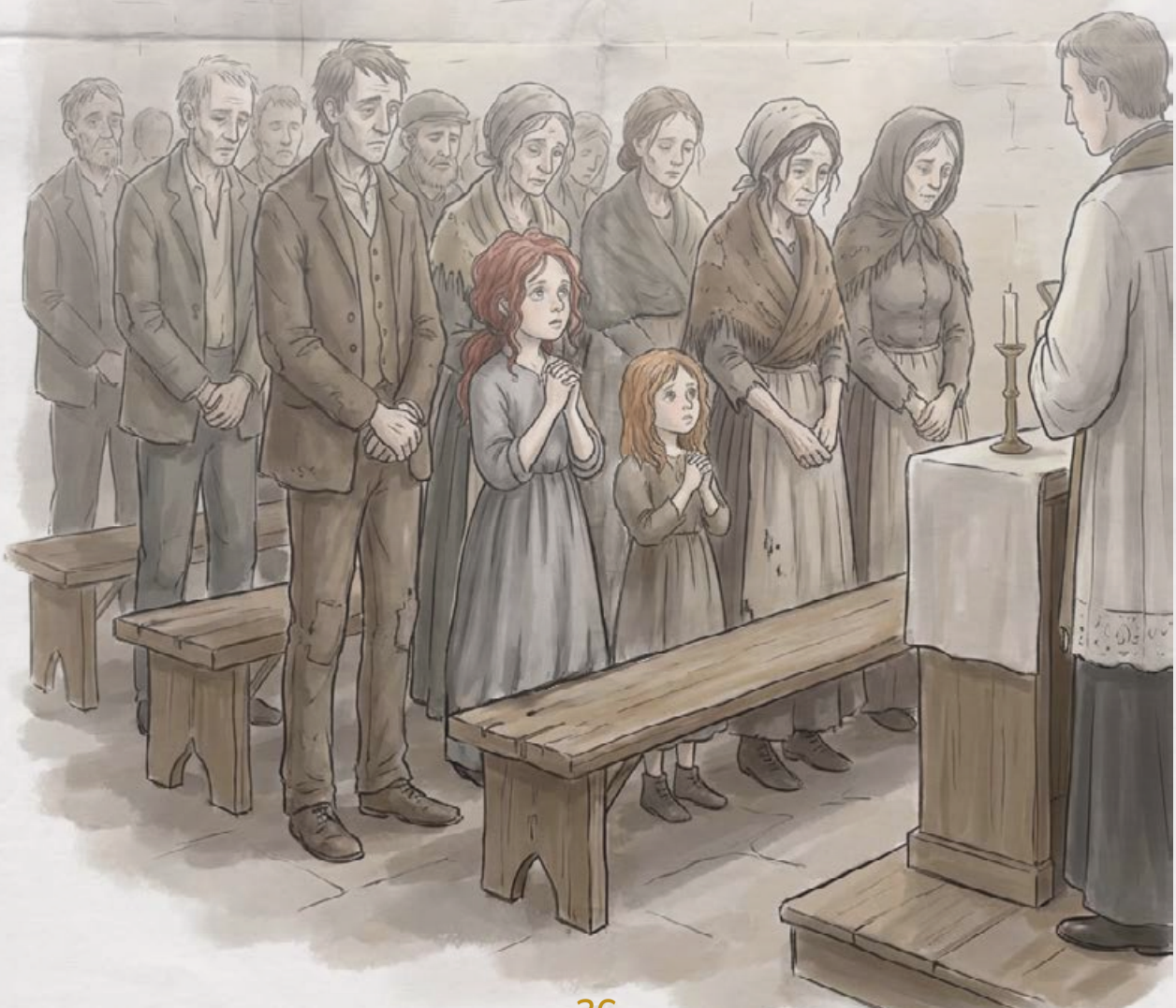


Religion

People were allowed to practise their religion when they were in the workhouse, but issues still arose. The Roman Catholic priest and the Church of Ireland clergyman were paid a salary and employed as chaplains to look after the religious needs of the paupers.

Services on Sundays were provided for those paupers who wanted to attend and a burial service was also available when paupers died.

There were claims that clergymen tried to convert paupers to their religion and this led to disputes. Another issue that arose was when orphans entered the workhouse and nobody knew to what religious group they belonged. When the religion of an orphan was not known, the child was brought up in the State religion, which was Church of Ireland's Protestant teaching. Relatives of these children would often object to this, maintaining the child had been baptised as a Roman Catholic.



CONSIDER

1. Can you give reasons why religion was important to paupers in the workhouse?
2. Was it right that the guardians decided what religion orphans should have in the workhouse?
3. Why would clergymen have tried to convert paupers to their religion?
4. Give reasons why workhouse chaplains were paid a salary.
5. Find out what the term 'souper' means and how it took place in the workhouses.

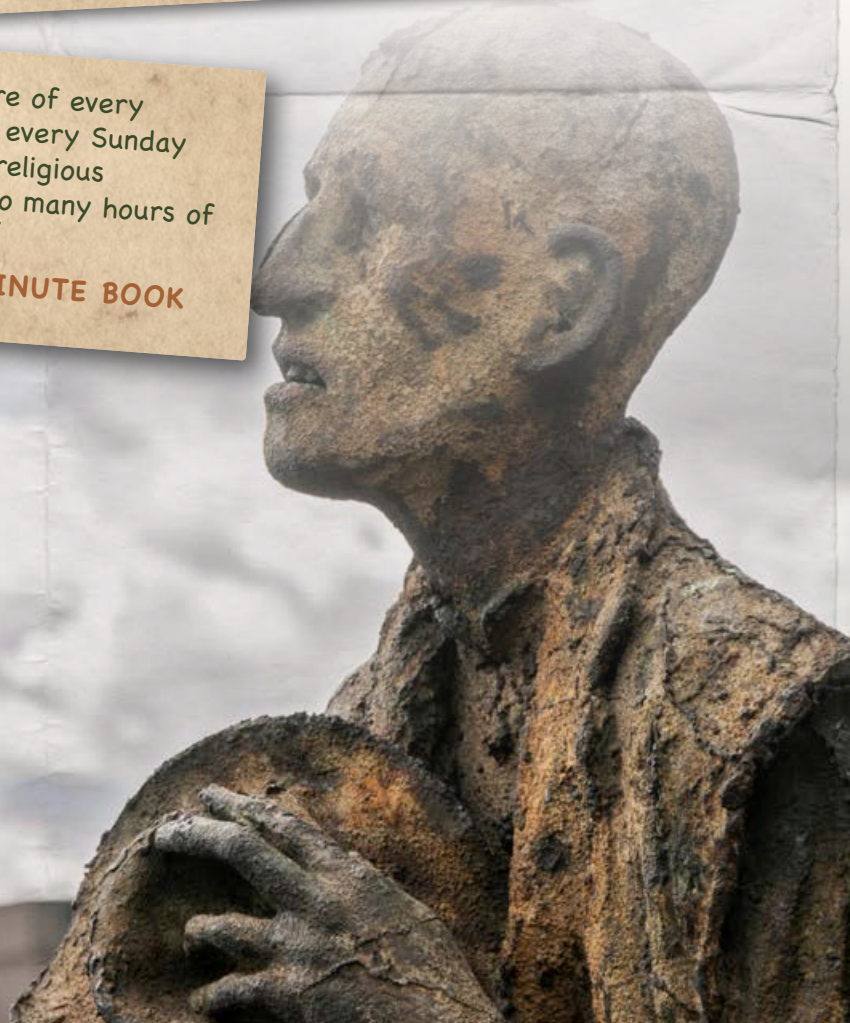


"I still have vivid and harrowing memories of the prison-like interior; the dark wards that were locked summer and winter from 8 am to 8 pm; the straw beds spread on the floor; the appalling 'uniforms' the inmates were forced to wear."

THOMAS HARRINGTON

[Rev. George Sheehan] "spends the entire of every Saturday at hearing confessions and of every Sunday in officiating at the Mass and in giving religious instruction to the paupers and spends so many hours of every day attending the sick and dying."

CORK CITY POOR LAW UNION MINUTE BOOK



Statue from the "Arrival series in Ireland Park, Dublin, by Rowan Gillespie. Source: yuplex - stock.adobe.com

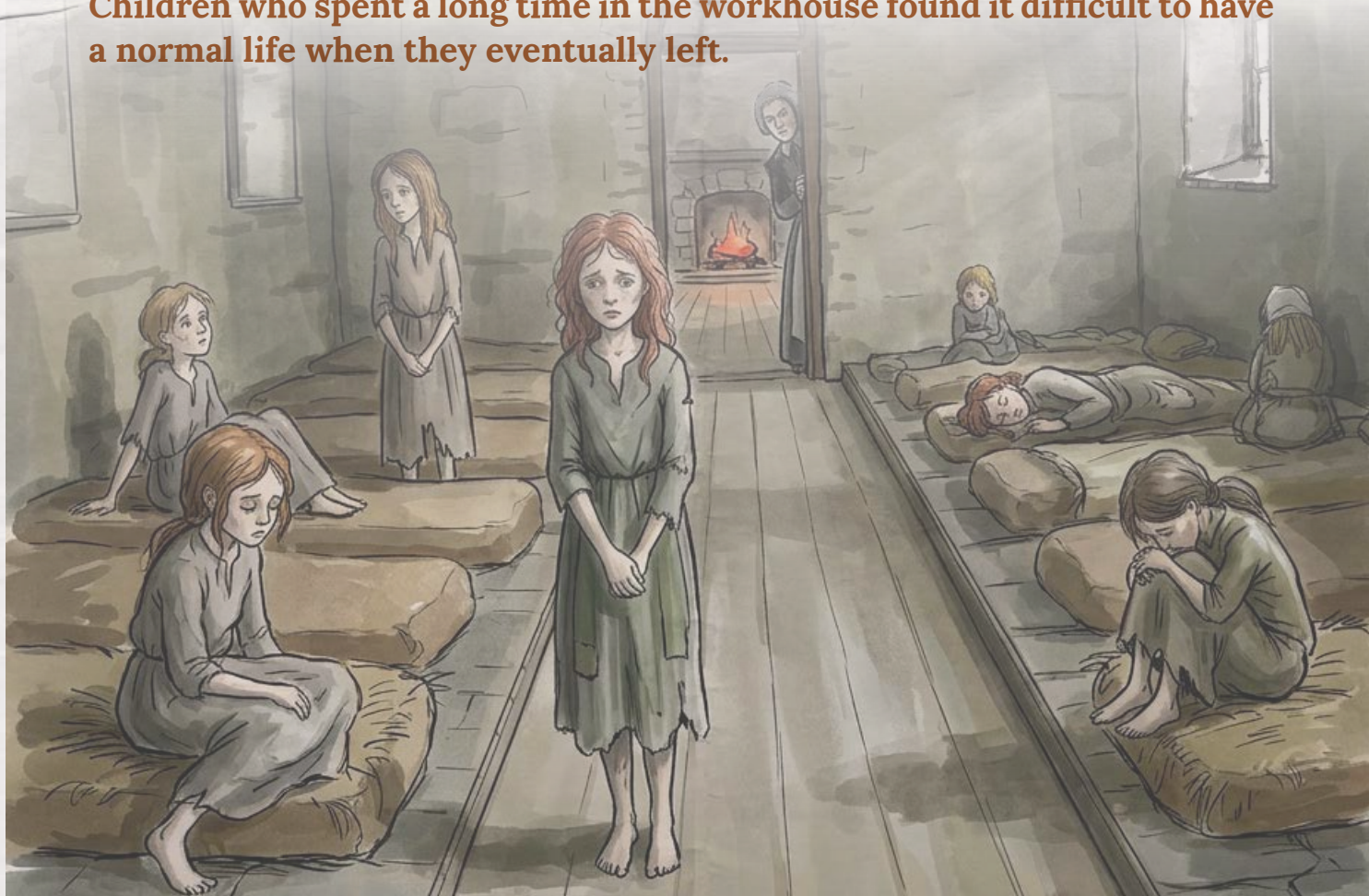
Reaction of children in the workhouses

Life in the workhouse was cruel and harsh, especially for children. They had to observe a lot of rules and they were always hungry. Many waited in hope and longing that their parents would come and rescue them from a life that was difficult.

The culture of rules and discipline had a long-term impact on the young inmates. Most of them no longer cried as they had lost hope that they would have a life outside the workhouse with their parents. For many this would never happen as their parents were dead or not in a position to come and collect them. This led to children being depressed and not motivated.

People who visited the workhouse found children suffering from anxiety and emotional stress, silent in their dormitories and with a vacant stare in their eyes. These were a lost generation of children who did not have a normal childhood, with little hope for the future. They lost the innocence of childhood and even survival in the workhouse was difficult.

Children who spent a long time in the workhouse found it difficult to have a normal life when they eventually left.



CONSIDER

1. Why did children no longer cry?
2. What does the vacant stare in the eyes of children indicate?
3. Why do you think children found it hard to adapt when they left the workhouse?
4. What would you consider a normal life?
5. You are a visitor to the workhouse; write a short report on the condition of the children in it.



"They sat listless and insensible, and seemed to be quite indifferent to everything passing around them; the faces of some quite yellow, those of others dark, as if even before death decomposition were settling in."

R. GOGGINS

"The poor house in Bandon was soon full of sick and starving people. Deaths were reported by the score. ... a meal given to some quite often made them sick because their stomachs were so weak from long fasting that solid food was only poison to them."

SEAMUS RIORDAN



Left profile of The "Orphan" from the "Arrival series in Ireland Park. Dublin, by Rowan Gillespie. Source: eugen - stock.adobe.com

Children and emigration

For children like Mary Fielding, there was little hope for a life outside the workhouses, despite hoping they would be able to leave at some time in the future. The problem was that many women and children had been a long time in the workhouse and they would have difficulties having a normal life outside of it. The guardians feared that they would become a long-term burden and it was costing £5 a year to keep a pauper in the workhouse.

There was an opportunity for some young girls to leave between 1848 and 1850 when the Australian authorities funded the travel cost of a group to the colony.

There was a need for servants and girls to marry the male colonists in Australia. The workhouse master selected the girls to be interviewed by an inspector who chose those who would travel. The girls had to be orphans and aged between fourteen and eighteen years.

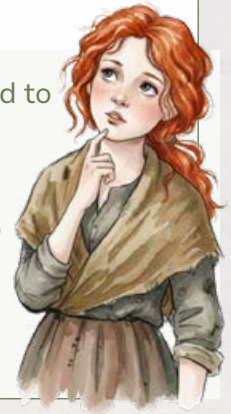


53 girls were sent from Ballinasloe workhouse and 57 from Tuam. Some girls decided not to leave Ireland and were replaced by others. Girls were also sent to Canada where they were looking for servants.

Mary Fielding was disappointed that she was not old enough to leave.

CONSIDER

1. Can you think of the reasons why young people in the workhouse wanted to emigrate?
2. Why did the guardians want the young girls to emigrate?
3. Why might the guardians also have selected girls over eighteen years to leave?
4. What do the numbers who left the Ballinasloe and Tuam workhouses for Australia indicate?



Write a diary entry that Mary Fielding might have written about the girls who were selected to go to Australia.

'Our paper of Monday contained a set of resolutions by the guardians of Kilrush Union, in which the government is urged to devise and carry into effect some plan of extensive emigration, as a remedy for Irish evils. ... Why so anxious to send fellow-creatures out of sight?

MORNING CHRONICLE, 1846

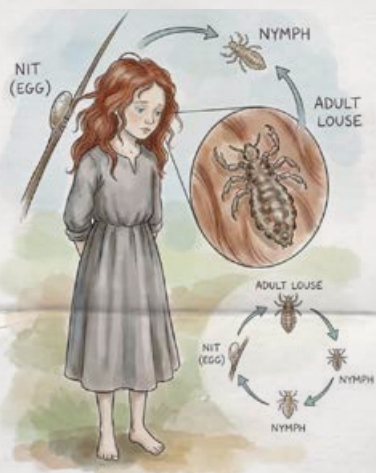
"Under these circumstances the guardians consider it of the highest importance to the Union to take advantage of so good an opportunity of getting rid of so many paupers who have been in the house for three years and who most certainly would have remained a charge on the rates."

LETTERKENNY BOARD OF GUARDIANS, 1850

National Famine Memorial in Murrisk, Co. Mayo, by John Behan, also known as The Coffin Ship.

Diseases in the workhouse

Children were in a confined space in the workhouse and many were weak and thin when they were admitted. Before long, many of the children had contracted diseases and were suffering. Diseases also spread when children were transferred from the main workhouse, where typhus (famine fever) and diarrhoea were widespread, to the auxiliary workhouses. As children were not given fruit and potatoes, scurvy also became a major problem.



Typhus is spread by lice and many children received the clothes of inmates who had died; these clothes were not washed and this spread the disease. Other diseases that affected children were dysentery (causing severe diarrhoea), measles, cholera and ophthalmia which affected children's eyesight and, when untreated, led to total blindness.

Between 1849 and 1853, 95,000 children in the workhouses suffered from ophthalmia which is linked to poverty, overcrowding, poor diet, exposure to cold and wet and inadequate bedding. As children slept four to a bed with poor bed clothing it was easily spread.

The remedy for most of the diseases is proper nutrition which was not available in the workhouses, in particular not for children.

Mary Fielding saw many of her friends contract these diseases and being sent to the infirmary in the workhouse, which treated the sick. Some recovered, but many did not.



CONSIDER

1. Why were children more likely to contract diseases in the workhouse?
2. Which of these diseases do you think caused the most deaths among children; and why?
3. Find out how typhus is treated today.
4. Why would ophthalmia be a critical disease for children?
5. What are the main diseases that people, including children, suffer from today? Find out how they are treated.

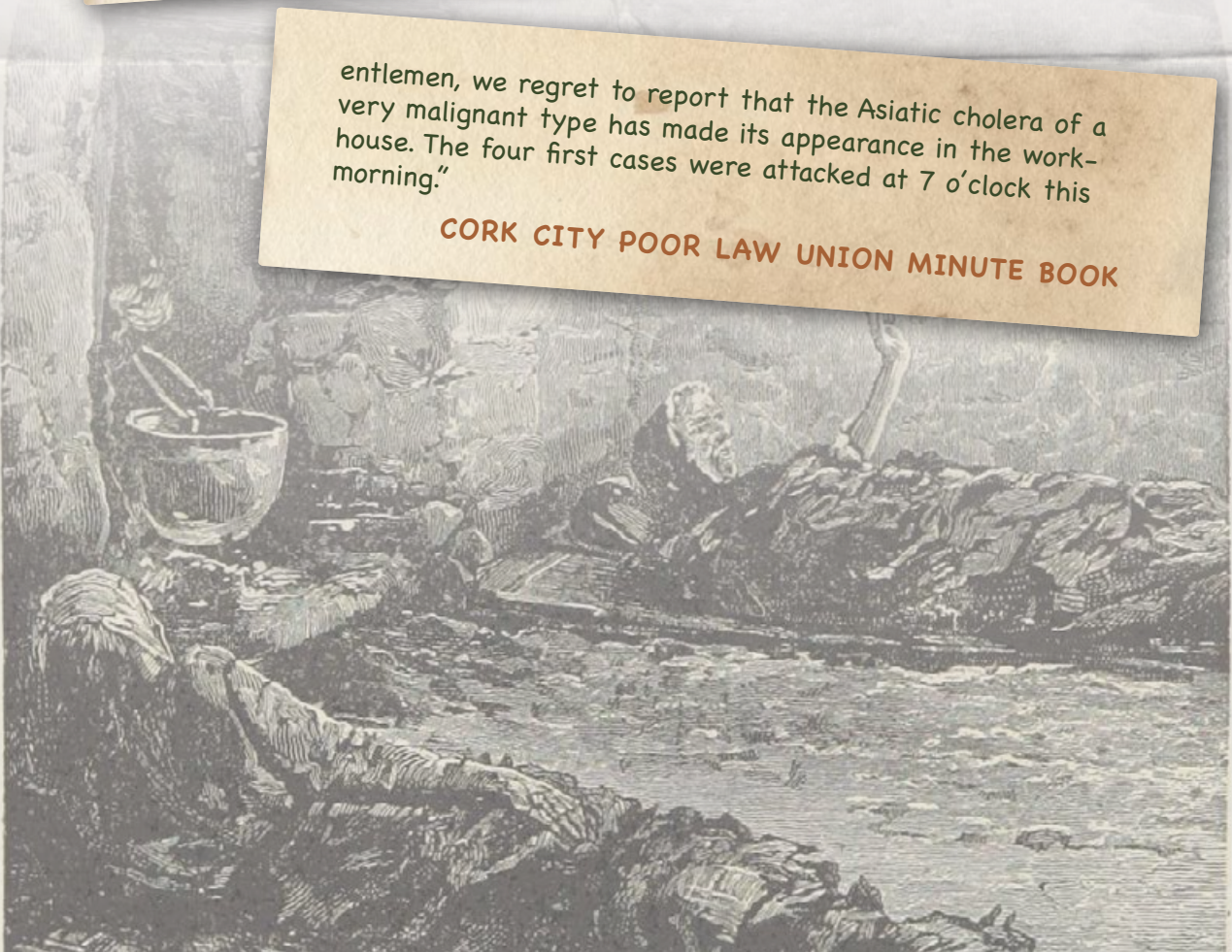


"Every room is so crowded that it is impossible to separate the sick from the healthy ... fifty patients are crowded into a room too small for twenty ... bedding is so short as it is necessary to place four or five in many of the beds ... thirty children labouring under disease were found in three beds."

FERMOY BOARD OF GUARDIANS

entlemen, we regret to report that the Asiatic cholera of a very malignant type has made its appearance in the workhouse. The four first cases were attacked at 7 o'clock this morning."

CORK CITY POOR LAW UNION MINUTE BOOK



The Famine at Bofin, *Our Boys in Ireland*, by Henry Willard French. Source: British Library

Death in the workhouses

Over one million people died during the Great Famine and of the 250,000 who died in the workhouses, many were children. People came into the workhouses in a poor state, hoping that food and medicines would keep them alive, but many died within a few days of being admitted. Some came to the workhouse in the hope of being buried in a coffin when they died. Such was the number of deaths that many were buried without a coffin. Sometimes, two children were put in one coffin for burial in the cemetery, which was beside the workhouse.

'Sliding coffins' were also used: the bottom was opened to release the body into the grave.

This type of coffin could be used many times. In some places, the guardians did not provide information on the exact number of people who died as they were afraid of the anger it would cause. Often, parents were not informed when their children died and they only found out from other pauper inmates.



CONSIDER

1. What were the reasons why people came into the workhouse before dying?
2. Do you think that people left it too late before they came to the workhouse; and why?
3. What do the numbers dying in the workhouses indicate?
4. What evidence is there that the workhouses were under pressure when paupers died?
5. Given the number of deaths, particularly of children, were people wise to enter the workhouse?



"The following day we visited the workhouse, containing 1,162 inmates. It was in a bad condition as regards fever and dysentery, no less than 200 being reported sick. The deaths here were frightful, nearly twenty per week."

JAMES HACK TUKE

"It was filthy and in such a condition as it ought not to be a receptacle for the sick. The floor was unclean and unwashed, the walls were sooty and dark. I saw no provision made for the ventilation of the room: no expedient carried out for properly ventilating the room."

MP O'BRIEN



Life for children after they left the workhouse

By 1855, the number of paupers in the workhouses had declined as agriculture began to improve and the potato crop was no longer attacked by blight. Jobs were now available on farms and there was a demand for agricultural labourers. The number of children in the workhouses had declined more slowly and in April 1851 there were still 76,724 children who were inmates. By 1859, this had come down to 11,511.

Some children were united with those parents who had left to seek work in the United States of America and were now able to send the passage fares so their sons and daughters could join them. Others were able to get jobs as farm labourers and servants in the homes of farmers. For these it was an opportunity to save money so they



Famine Ship Memorial park in Galway city. Credit: Bolyarska, Eli

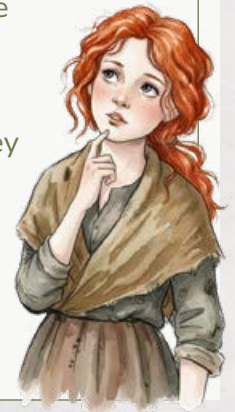
could join their friends and relations who had left Ireland. There was the hope for others that they would marry and have a family. They would make sure that their children would never have to enter a workhouse and endure the hardship and conditions they had endured.

Mary Fielding left Portumna workhouse and got a position as a house maid with a large farmer near Portumna. While she had a hard life in both the Ballinasloe and Portumna workhouses, they had saved her from starvation and death.



CONSIDER

1. Why do you think the number of children in the workhouse declined more slowly than adults when the Great Famine ended?
2. How do you think children reacted to their release from the workhouses?
3. What do you think was the reaction of children when they discovered they were going to join up with their parents?
4. Can you think of any reasons why children would have wanted to go to North America after being in the workhouse?
5. Write a paragraph on the feelings of a young adult after leaving the workhouse.



"Age 16. Has been nine years in the Workhouse; is an orphan; her father, a soldier, died ten years ago, and his widow about a year after went to the Union with five children, where, after lingering in very bad health for four years, she cannot tell where; another brother, and a sister, remain in the Union."

IRISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, 1859



Emigrating paupers on board a ship, seeing their Irish homeland disappear from view
Credit: Edward Duncan, illustrator working for the *Illustrated London News*, 1849

TASKS

Activity Sheets

1. Write a page about a day a young person like Mary Fielding spent in the workhouse; discuss what should be included in class with your fellow students and your teacher. Use the following sentences to start:

- **This morning, I woke to ...**
- **At roll call we ...**
- **The breakfast today was ...**
- **In school, I learned ...**
- **The best part of my day was ...**
- **Tonight, I hope that ...**

2. Do some research or have a class discussion about what life was like for a young person in the workhouse and use Mary's voice to write 8 to 10 sentences, guided by the following questions:

- **How would a young person have spent their day in the workhouse?**
- **What was the day like for a young person from the time they got up in the morning till they went to bed in the evening?**
- **What type of problems did the young person encounter in the workhouse?**
- **How did the young person feel about their time in the workhouse?**
- **Were there any times when the young person was happy?**
- **How would the young person have got on with other children in the workhouse?**
- **What do you think the young people would have spoken about?**
- **Are there people that the children would have thoughts about?**
- **What are the occasions that the children would have missed most?**

QUIZ

Quiz

The Portumna workhouse opened in:

- a. 1852
- b. 1842
- c. 1862
- d. 1838

ANSWER:

The Quarter Acre Clause meant that families with more than 1 quarter-acre of land:

- a. Had to emigrate
- b. Move to Australia
- c. Could not get relief
- d. Got extra relief

ANSWER:

Stirabout is best described as:

- a. Porridge made from oats
- b. Soup
- c. Cheese
- d. Bread

ANSWER:

Children in the workhouse often ate:

- a. Fruit salad
- b. Pasta
- c. Chicken and vegetables
- d. Bread, milk potatoes or gruel

ANSWER:

In the workhouse, families were:

- a. Only separated at night
- b. Kept together
- c. Chosen by age only
- d. Separated (men, women, boys, girls)

ANSWER:

A 'guardian' was:

- a A Priest.
- b. A doctor
- c. An elected person who ran the workhouse system
- d. A teacher

ANSWER:

Girls might learn in the workhouse:

- a. Plumbing
- b. Shipbuilding
- c. Mining
- d. Sewing/Spinning/housekeeping.

ANSWER:

A common disease that affected children's eyes:

- a. Chickenpox
- b. Mumps
- c. Ophthalmia
- d. Influenza

ANSWER:

After 1847, numbers in the workhouse partly increased because:

- a. A better harvest
- b. School closures
- c. Free food for all
- d. Evictions.

ANSWER:

A place as an overflow/extra workhouse was called:

- a. Storehouse
- b. Annex
- c. Hospital
- d. Auxiliary workhouse

ANSWER:

WORD SEARCH

Portumna Workhouse

O	M	R	Y	O	O	C	H	A	P	L	A	I	N	Q
S	A	G	F	R	Z	Q	P	N	U	T	Z	F	D	O
E	T	J	E	U	C	R	Z	M	T	H	G	I	L	B
N	R	W	U	L	B	T	M	U	O	U	X	T	U	F
I	O	T	A	E	Q	C	B	T	B	G	H	T	A	Y
M	N	O	K	S	O	S	G	R	Q	H	U	J	P	A
A	V	C	O	U	U	I	N	O	R	C	W	I	K	Y
F	H	Q	J	O	A	C	S	P	Y	N	D	M	D	J
M	C	A	V	H	S	T	I	R	A	B	O	U	T	A
G	G	B	P	K	M	W	M	I	N	C	S	U	G	Y
V	I	K	C	R	J	K	D	P	A	U	P	E	R	A
N	Y	D	E	O	H	R	W	D	A	B	O	Z	P	F
V	R	G	O	W	A	Q	G	X	Y	E	N	U	M	D
M	N	G	A	U	R	E	T	S	A	M	I	Z	S	J
A	G	F	G	M	T	U	E	T	A	L	S	S	D	B

Words to find

Blight

Famine

Chaplain

Guardian

Matron

Master

Pauper

Rules

Portumna

Slate

Workhouse

Stirabout

SKETCH A TIMELINE

Sketch a timeline of the Famine years

Mark and label these on a horizontal line:

- 1838: Poor Law for Ireland introduced (workhouses planned)
- 1841 – 1842: First workhouses in County Galway opened (Gort, Ballinasloe, 1842)
- 1845 – 1846: Potato blight and crop failure nationwide
- 1847: Public Works end; Quarter Acre Clause; surge in evictions (Black '47)
- 1848 – 1849: Female Orphan Scheme, auxiliary (extra) workhouses opened
- 1850: Decision to open Portumna workhouse
- 1852: Portumna workhouse opened (500 places)

Add two events of your own from the booklet and show with a small icon.

Use recycled materials or Lego to make a simple layout of the workhouse

**Create a poster with the title 'Life in Portumna Workhouse'.
Include drawings, facts and quotes.**

Investigate a famine in another part of the world today and find out why it is taking place. What is the rest of the world doing to help? How can we help?

Glossary

Abscond: to leave without permission.

British Relief Association: organisation founded in London to help the starving Irish people.

Corporal punishment: physical force used to discipline.

Dormitories: large rooms where people sleep.

Hungry months: months when there were no potatoes available – May, June, July.

Indian meal: maize.

Inmates: the people who lived in workhouses.

Landlord: person who owned land and rented it to farmers.

Magistrates: court judges.

Nutrition: the elements of foods and drinks that nourish the body to attain overall health.

Petty Sessions: court of law where judges tried people.

Paupers: people who lived in workhouses to receive relief.

Poor Law (Ireland) Act: a legal act which ensured relief to the poor and destitute in Ireland.

Poor Law Guardians: people who were elected to implement the Poor Law Act in an area.

Poor Law Union: one of 130 areas where the Poor Law regulations, inc. a workhouse, were implemented.

Quarter Acre Clause: the clause of law that did not allow relief to be given to people with a farm of over one-quarter acre.

Rates: taxation which property owners had to pay to fund the workhouses.

Ratepayers: people with property who paid the tax to fund the workhouses.

Solitary confinement: confinement of only one person in a cell, with little human contact.

Souper: a person who dispensed soup in the name of charity but expected the recipient to convert from Roman Catholicism to the Church of Ireland or a person who had changed religion in exchange for food (soup).

Stirabout: porridge made from oats and boiled in water.

