

## WORKHOUSES IN THE VICTORIAN AGE



### Strand Union Workhouse - Londra

A workhouse was a place where those unable to support themselves were offered accommodation and employment. Workhouses are closely associated with life in Victorian England, although they are in fact much older.

**The Poor Law Amendment Act** of 1834 ensured that no able-bodied person could get poor relief unless they went to live in special workhouses. The idea was that, through working, the poor would learn good habits, growing less lazy and perhaps learning to fend for themselves. This attitude ignored the very real problems faced by the poor, such as lack of education, the need to support large families, and rising costs of living in many urban areas.



### Bambini in una workhouse

Also in the workhouses were orphaned and abandoned children, the physically and mentally sick, the disabled, the elderly and unmarried mothers.

### Families in the workhouse

Husbands and wives were separated into dormitories and not allowed to meet, and many children were housed separately from their parents. Often they could also find themselves 'hired out' - sold- to work in factories or mines.

The education the children received did not include the two most important skills of all: reading and writing, which were needed to get a good job. From the age of 12 years, were apprenticed for up to seven years to work in the local community as domestic servants and farm labourers etc. where their masters were liable for their welfare.



### **Donne al lavoro in una workhouse**

**The poor** were made to wear a uniform. This meant that everyone looked the same and everyone outside knew they were poor and lived in the workhouse.

Upon entering the workhouse, the poor were stripped and bathed (under supervision). Because life in the workhouse was supposed to be humiliating and shameful, many of the rules focused on emphasizing this. Rations were typically poor, tasteless and sometimes to the point of starvation.

People had to face very harsh discipline and, in some workhouses, residents were expected to be silent, talking only at work or on the way to jobs.

### **Workhouses closing**

Historians are still debating when exactly the workhouse system came to an end.

Some date its demise to 1930 when the Board of Guardians system was abolished and many workhouses were redesignated as Public Assistance Institutions. Others date it to 1948 and the introduction of the National Health Service, when many former workhouse buildings were turned into public hospitals, many of which still survive today.