Poverty and Families in the Victorian Era

http://www.hiddenlives.org.uk/articles/poverty.html

This article by Barbara Daniels gives an overview of the causes and the effects of poverty on poor families and children in Victorian Britain. At the time of writing Barbara is a Ph.D. student with the Department of Religious Studies, at The Open University. Her subject is "Street Children and Philanthropy in the latter half of the 19th Century".

Population increase

The nineteenth century saw a huge growth in the population of Great Britain. The reason for this increase is not altogether clear. Various ideas have been put forward; larger families; more children surviving infancy; people living longer; immigration, especially large numbers of immigrants coming from Ireland fleeing the potato famine and the unemployment situation in their own country.

By the end of the century there were three times more people living in Great Britain than at the beginning.

Growth of the cities

Although the population of the country as a whole was rising at an unprecedented rate, that of the towns and cities was increasing by leaps and bounds. This was due to the effects of the industrial revolution; people were flocking into the towns and cities in search of employment. For some it was also the call of the unknown, adventure and a better way of life.

The search for employment

Therefore all these factors – population explosion, immigration both foreign and domestic – added up and resulted in a scramble for any job available.

Large numbers of both skilled and unskilled people were looking for work, so wages were low, barely above subsistence level. If work dried up, or was seasonal, men were laid off, and because they had hardly enough to live on
when they were in work, they had no savings to fall back on.

**Child labour**

Children were expected to help towards the family budget. They often worked long hours in dangerous jobs and in difficult situations for a very little wage.

For example, there were the climbing boys employed by the chimney sweeps; the little children who could scramble under machinery to retrieve cotton bobbins; boys and girls working down the coal mines, crawling through tunnels too narrow and low to take an adult. Some children worked as errand boys, crossing sweepers, shoe blacks, and they sold matches, flowers and other cheap goods.

**The housing shortage**

Low wages and the scramble for jobs meant that people needed to live near to where work was available. Time taken walking to and from work would extend an already long day beyond endurance. Consequently available housing became scarce and therefore expensive, resulting in extremely overcrowded conditions.

**Slum housing**

All these problems were magnified in London where the population grew at a record rate. Large houses were turned into flats and tenements and the landlords who owned them, were not concerned about the upkeep or the condition of these dwellings.

In his book *The Victorian underworld*, Kellow Chesney gives a graphic description of the conditions in which many were living:

‘Hideous slums, some of them acres wide, some no more than crannies of
obscure misery, make up a substantial part of the, metropolis … In big, once handsome houses, thirty or more people of all ages may inhabit a single room,’ (1)

**Overcrowding**

Many people could not afford the rents that were being charged and so they rented out space in their room to one or two lodgers who paid between twopence and fourpence a day.

Great wealth and extreme poverty lived side by side because the tenements, slums, rookeries were only a stones throw from the large elegant houses of the rich.

The name ‘rookeries’ was given to these dwellings because of the way people lived without separate living accommodation for each family. The analogy being that whereas other birds appear to live in separate families, rooks do not. Neither did the very poor in the tenements of London.

**Poor sanitary conditions**

Henry Mayhew was an investigative journalist who wrote a series of articles for the Morning Chronicle about the way the poor of London lived and worked.

In an article published on 24th September 1849 he described a London Street with a tidal ditch running through it, into which drains and sewers emptied. The ditch contained the only water the people in the street had to drink, and it was ‘the colour of strong green tea’, in fact it was ‘more like watery mud than muddy water’. This is the report he gave:

‘As we gazed in horror at it, we saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents into it; we saw a whole tier of doorless privies in the open road,
common to men and women built over it; we heard bucket after bucket of filth splash into it’ (2).

Mayhew’s articles were later published in a book called London Labour and the London Poor and in the introduction he wrote:

‘…the condition of a class of people whose misery, ignorance, and vice, amidst all the immense wealth and great knowledge of “the first city in the world”, is, to say the very least, a national disgrace to us’ (3).

Destitution

Many cases of death caused by starvation and destitution were reported. One example of such a report will suffice. In 1850 an inquest was held on a 38 year old man whose body was reported as being little more than a skeleton, his wife was described as being ‘the very personification of want’ and her child as a ‘skeleton infant’(4).

Homeless children

Obviously these conditions affected children as well as adults.

There were children living with their families in these desperate situations but there were also numerous, homeless, destitute children living on the streets of London.

Many children were turned out of home and left to fend for themselves at an early age and many more ran away because of ill treatment.

In her book The Victorian town child, Pamela Horn writes:

‘In 1848 Lord Ashley referred to more than thirty thousand ‘naked, filthy, roaming lawless and deserted children, in and around the metropolis’ ’ (5).
Children and crime

Many destitute children lived by stealing, and to the respectable Victorians they must have seemed a very real threat to society. Something had to be done about them to preserve law and order.

Many people thought that education was the answer and ragged schools were started to meet the need. However there were dissenting voices against this. Henry Mayhew argued that:

‘since crime was not caused by illiteracy, it could not be cured by education … the only certain effects being the emergence of a more skilful and sophisticated race of criminals’ (6).

Society's attitude towards the poor

It does appear that many people and various agencies were becoming aware of the problem, but the sheer scale of it must have seemed overwhelming. One of the difficulties in dealing with it were contemporary attitudes:

‘the poor were improvident, they wasted any money they had on drink and gambling’;

‘God had put people in their place in life and this must not be interfered with because the life after death was more important’

are some of the comments people might have made.

As far as the later comment is concerned, this is clearly demonstrated in a hymn published in 1848 by Cecil Frances Alexander: The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them, high and lowly, And order’d their estate (7)

Social charities

As the century progressed the plight of the poor, and of the destitute homeless children, impinged on the consciences of more and more people. The Victorian era can also be thought of as one of intense philanthropy.
Many of our modern day charitable institutions, such as The Children's Society, have their roots at this time.

Barbara Daniels, March 2003

References

For full publication details of the items listed below, links will take you to the Bibliography section of this website. If material from the Internet has been cited, the link will take you directly to the relevant web page.

2. Henry Mayhew in the Morning Chronicle, *A visit to the cholera districts of Bermondsey*, 24 September 1849  
4. *The Times*, 20 November 1850  
   This is the third verse of the hymn *All things bright and beautiful*, which was first published in 1848 in *Hymns for little children*, by CFH (Cecil Frances Humphreys), (London: Joseph Masters, 1848). In modern versions of this hymn this verse is omitted.

Down and Out in Victorian London

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/olivertwist/ei_downandout.html

Victorian Morals and the Poor

The Industrial Age and the financial opportunities surrounding it led to a rapidly growing middle class in early 19th-century Britain. Previously, the aristocratic upper class -- one that scorned working for a living -- dictated economic and social influence. Now the bourgeoisie, including factory owners, managers and purveyors of new services, wanted its place in society and needed to legitimize labor. They put forth a new ideal of work as moral virtue: God loved those who helped themselves, while "burdens on the
public" were sinful and weak. This attitude validated the middle class by giving it someone to look down upon.

Subsequently, welfare in Dickens's time was based on deterrence rather than support. Parish workhouses, the last resort for the homeless poor, were made as miserable as possible to discourage reliance on public assistance. Upon entering, inmates were stripped, searched, washed, given shapeless striped clothing to wear and shorn of hair -- in short, they were treated like criminals. Husbands and wives were separated into men's and women's quarters to "avert breeding." Mothers were taken away from children to end "negative influences" on the young. Brothers and sisters were kept apart to avoid the "natural" inclination of the poor toward incest. After inmates were split up by age and sex, no health-related separation took place: the ill, insane and able-bodied all lived together. Meals were purposely inadequate, consisting mainly of single pints of gruel, a few ounces of bread and water. Rooms measuring 20 feet long accommodated upwards of 30 people. Most inmates shared a bed. Heating was overlooked; often a block of rooms shared but one fireplace. Work involved back-breaking labor such as stone-splitting, mill-driving (on treadmills), bone-crushing (for fertilizer) and heavy housework. The least able-bodied -- the old, the sick and the very young -- suffered most of all.

The workhouse was administered by unpaid bureaucrats, headed by the
Beadle, an elected official. These civil servants treated workhouse residents with scorn and cruelty, reminding them with Biblical passages how lucky they were ("Blessed are the poor..."). The workhouse staff received a somewhat better class of lodging and food for their efforts.

1834 Poor Law

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/1834-poor-law/

In 1834 a new Poor Law was introduced. Some people welcomed it because they believed it would:

- reduce the cost of looking after the poor
- take beggars off the streets
- encourage poor people to work hard to support themselves

The new Poor Law ensured that the poor were housed in workhouses, clothed and fed. Children who entered the workhouse would receive some schooling. In return for this care, all workhouse paupers would have to work for several hours each day.

However, not all Victorians shared this point of view. Some people, such as Richard Oastler, spoke out against the new Poor Law, calling the workhouses ‘Prisons for the Poor’. The poor themselves hated and feared the threat of the workhouse so much that there were riots in northern towns.

Background

Before 1834, the cost of looking after the poor was growing more expensive every year. This cost was paid for by the middle and upper classes in each town through their local taxes. There was a real suspicion amongst the
middle and upper classes that they were paying the poor to be lazy and avoid work.

After years of complaint, a new Poor Law was introduced in 1834. The new Poor Law was meant to reduce the cost of looking after the poor, prevent scroungers and impose a system which would be the same all over the country.

Under the new Poor Law, parishes were grouped into unions and each union had to build a workhouse if they did not already have one. Except in special circumstances, poor people could now only get help if they were prepared to leave their homes and go into a workhouse.

TOWNSHIP OF TOXTETH PARK

Extracts from the Order of the POOR LAW BOARD.

PUNISHMENTS FOR

MISBEHAVIOUR OF THE PAUPERS

IN THE WORKHOUSE

(c) www.workhouses.org.uk

Art. 127. Any Pauper, being an inmate of the Workhouse, who shall neglect to observe any of the regulations in the Order as are applicable to him as such inmate—

1. Or who shall make any noise when silence is ordered to be kept;

2. Or shall utter obscene or profane language;

3. Or shall be found drunk or under the influence of drink;

4. Or shall spread dirt or rubbish about the workhouse;

5. Or shall threaten to strike or to assault any person;

6. Or shall slander or ill-name any person;

7. Or shall refuse or neglect to work, after having been required to do so;

8. Or shall contract sickness;

9. Or shall play at cards or other games of chance;

10. Or shall refuse to go into his proper work, or, if he enter or attempt to enter, without permission, the work or yard appropriate to any class of paupers other than that to which he belongs;

11. Or shall open any door or window or permit the escape of any pauper from the Workhouse occasioned by negligence or otherwise;

12. Or shall refuse to obey any of the rules and regulations to which he is subject;

13. Or shall refuse to obey any of the rules and regulations to which he is subject;

14. Or shall wilfully injure, deface, or destroy any property or chattels belonging to the Guardians;

15. Or shall wilfully waste or spoil any provisions, stocks, tools or materials, or work belonging to the Guardians.

Or shall be drunk;

Or shall act or write obscenely or profanely;

Or shall wilfully disturb any person, or Public Worship in the Workhouse, or at Divine Service or Prayer in the Workhouse.

Or shall be deemed REFRACtory.

Art. 128. The Master may, with or without the direction of the Guardians, punish any refractory pauper for continuing during the same period of twenty-four hours, or during the same period of twenty-four hours in the same workhouse, in any of the following cases—

1. Or who shall wilfully set or cast out another person at work or otherwise to suffer;

2. Or shall wilfully assault or abuse any person.

Or shall wilfully injure or destroy any provisions, stocks, tools or materials, or work belonging to the Guardians.

Or shall be drunk;

Or shall act or write obscenely or profanely;

Or shall wilfully disturb any person at work or otherwise to suffer;

Or shall wilfully assault or abuse any person.

Or shall be deemed REFRACtory.

Art. 129. The Master may, with or without the direction of the Guardians, punish any refractory pauper for continuing during the same period of twenty-four hours, or during the same period of twenty-four hours, in any of the following cases—

1. Or who shall wilfully set or cast out another person at work or otherwise to suffer;

2. Or shall wilfully assault or abuse any person.

Or shall be drunk;

Or shall act or write obscenely or profanely;

Or shall wilfully disturb any person at work or otherwise to suffer;

Or shall wilfully assault or abuse any person.

Or shall be deemed REFRACtory.

Art. 130. The Master may, with or without the direction of the Guardians, punish any refractory pauper for continuing during the same period of twenty-four hours, or during the same period of twenty-four hours, in any of the following cases—

1. Or who shall wilfully set or cast out another person at work or otherwise to suffer;

2. Or shall wilfully assault or abuse any person.

Or shall be drunk;

Or shall act or write obscenely or profanely;

Or shall wilfully disturb any person at work or otherwise to suffer;

Or shall wilfully assault or abuse any person.

Or shall be deemed REFRACtory.

Conditions inside the workhouse were deliberately harsh, so that only those who desperately needed help would ask for it. Families were split up and housed in different parts of the workhouse.

The poor were made to wear a uniform and the diet was monotonous.

There were also strict rules and regulations to follow. Inmates,
male and female, young and old were made to work hard, often doing unpleasant jobs such as picking oakum or breaking stones. Children could also find themselves hired out to work in factories or mines.

Shortly after the new Poor Law was introduced, a number of scandals hit the headlines. The most famous was Andover Workhouse, where it was reported that half-starved inmates were found eating the rotting flesh from bones. In response to these scandals the government introduced stricter rules for those who ran the workhouses and they also set up a system of regular inspections. However, inmates were still at the mercy of unscrupulous masters and matrons who treated the poor with contempt and abused the rules.

Although most people did not have to go to the workhouse, it was always threatening if a worker became unemployed, sick or old. Increasingly, workhouses contained only orphans, the old, the sick and the insane. Not surprisingly the new Poor Law was very unpopular. It seemed to punish people who were poor through no fault of their own.