

Living in the Victorian Workhouse

What Were Workhouses?

Workhouses were large buildings where poor people who had no home or job lived. People would do jobs around the workhouse in order to stay there to have a roof over their heads. It was seen as a way for the poor to support themselves but many feared going there. As well as the poor, orphaned children, the sick, disabled, elderly and unmarried mothers were also usually sent to the workhouse.

Living in a workhouse was the last thing people wanted to do. If a man with a family had to enter a workhouse, his whole family had to go with him. It was thought to be shameful because it meant he could not look after his own family and he could not get a job.

Food

Food was bread, cheese and sometimes meat. It was common to miss a meal if you did something wrong.



Families in a Workhouse

The men, women, and children lived in different parts of the building. Children only spent a short amount of time each week with their parents. Large groups slept in the same room and many were made to share beds.

Children had lessons in reading, writing, maths and religion. However, teachers were often cruel. Children were not supposed to be hit, but there are reports that they were often hit with a ruler or stick in class.

Girls were taught how to sew as well as other skills that would help them become a maid when they left the workhouse at fourteen years old.

Jobs in the Workhouse

Jobs in the workhouse involved a lot of hard work. Some of the jobs included:

Men	stone breaking grinding corn chopping wood working in the fields
Women	laundry cleaning scrubbing walls and floors sewing and weaving

Bad Reputation

Workhouses became known for their terrible conditions and people starving there. Many people, including the writer Charles Dickens, were against their use.

By 1929, new laws were introduced to allow workhouses to be turned into hospitals and in 1930, workhouses were officially closed. Because of the number of people living in workhouses, it took a number of years before all workhouses had disappeared.



Questions

1. Which of these groups was **not** sent to the workhouse? Tick **one**.

- ☐ elderly
- ☐ wealthy
- ☐ disabled
- ☐ orphaned children

2. What happened if a man with a family was sent to the workhouse?

3. Which of these foods were part of daily meals? Tick **two**.

- ☐ cheese
- ☐ vegetables
- ☐ bread
- ☐ fruit

4. Match the jobs to whether they were done by men or women.

men

women

laundry

stone breaking

wood chopping

scrubbing walls

5. Fill in the missing words.

Workhouses became _____ for their _____
conditions and people _____ there.

6. What were many workhouses turned into after 1929? Tick **one**.

- ☐ schools
- ☐ churches
- ☐ houses
- ☐ hospitals

7. At the start of the text, it says that people feared going to the workhouse. Why do you think this is? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Answers

1. Which of these groups was **not** sent to the workhouse? Tick **one**.

- ☐ elderly
- ☒ wealthy
- ☐ disabled
- ☐ orphaned children

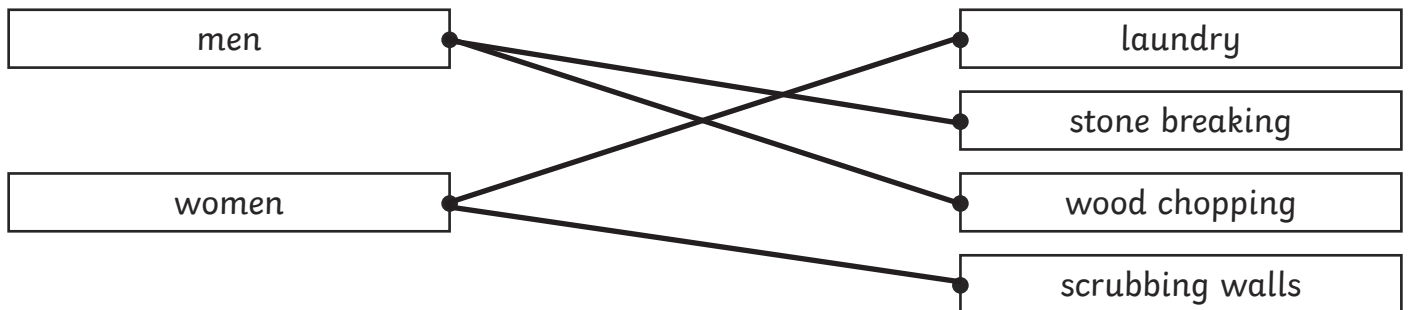
2. What happened if a man with a family was sent to the workhouse?

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3. Which of these foods were part of daily meals? Tick **two**.

- ☒ cheese
- ☐ vegetables
- ☒ bread
- ☐ fruit

4. Match the jobs to whether they were done by men or women.



5. Fill in the missing words.

Workhouses became **known** for their **terrible** conditions and people **starving** there.

6. What were many workhouses turned into after 1929? Tick **one**.

- ☐ schools
- ☐ churches
- ☐ houses
- ☒ hospitals

7. At the start of the text, it says that people feared going to the workhouse. Why do you think this is? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Pupil's own response, referring to the text, such as: I think people feared going to the workhouse because the conditions were terrible. People had to do hard work and had a small amount of basic food, which you could miss if you did something wrong. People were also split up from their family and had to share beds.

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What Were Workhouses?

Workhouses were large buildings where poor people who had no home or job lived. It was introduced as part of the Poor Laws system, where those who were paupers could live and work. It was intended as a place for people to work themselves out of poverty, though many were seen as prisons for the poor, orphaned children, the sick, disabled, elderly and unmarried mothers.

Living in a workhouse was the last thing people wanted to do. If a man with a wife and children had to enter a workhouse, his whole family had to go with him. It was thought to be shameful because it meant he could not look after his own family and he could not get a job.

Families in a Workhouse

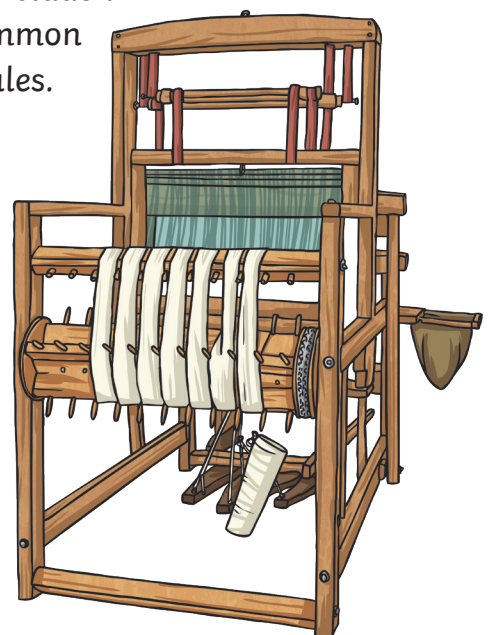
The men, women, and children were housed in different parts of the building and were kept apart as often as possible, even when not working. People were crammed into as small a space as possible, with most people having to share beds. This meant that diseases, such as ringworm, spread easily.

Children had lessons in reading, writing, maths and religion for three hours a day. However, teachers were often cruel. There were rules in place against beating children but there are reports that some were hit with a ruler or stick in class. Girls were taught how to sew, as well as other skills that would help them become a maid when they left the workhouse at fourteen years old.

Food was small portions of plain, simple meals, usually bread, broth, cheese and occasionally meat. Second helpings were strictly forbidden and many people went hungry. It was a common punishment to miss mealtimes if you broke any rules.

Jobs in the Workhouse

Jobs in the workhouse involved a lot of hard work. Men were expected to perform tiring tasks, such as stone breaking, grinding corn, chopping wood and working in the fields. Women were expected to sew and weave, clean the laundry, scrub the walls and floors and other general cleaning tasks. Both men and women had to work on unpicking old ropes, known as 'oakum'.

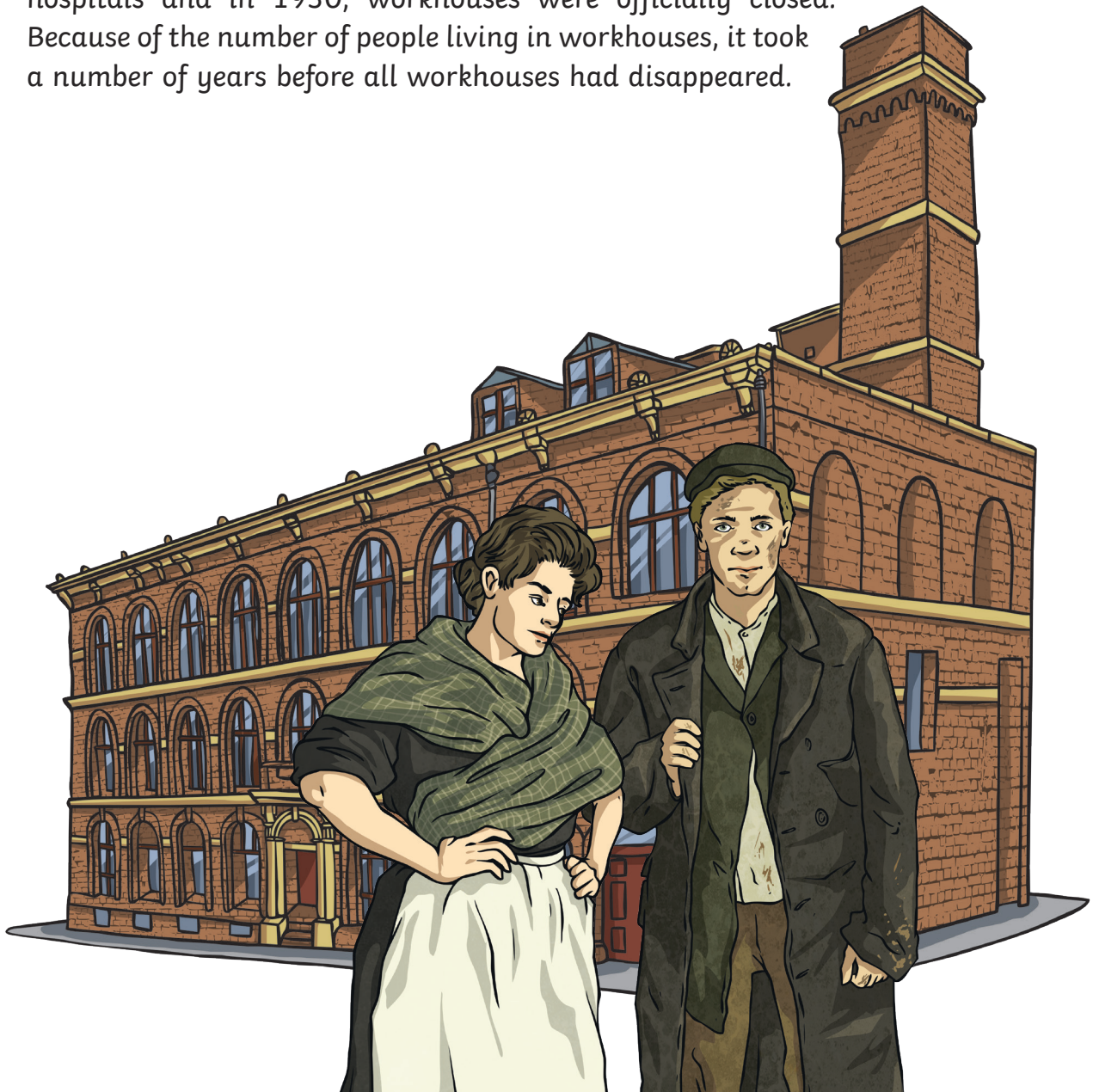


The working day in the workhouse was long. People would be woken early, around 5 a.m., and aside from prayers and meal times, were expected to work until they were sent to bed around 8 p.m.

Bad Reputation

Workhouses became known for their terrible conditions and people starving there. Many people, including the writer Charles Dickens, were against their use. Dickens famously used a workhouse as part of the setting for his book, *Oliver Twist*, showing them to be cruel places.

By 1929, new laws were introduced to allow workhouses to be turned into hospitals and in 1930, workhouses were officially closed. Because of the number of people living in workhouses, it took a number of years before all workhouses had disappeared.



Questions

1. What were workhouses introduced as part of? Tick **one**.

- ☐ The Workhouse Laws
- ☐ The poor Laws
- ☐ The Homeless Laws
- ☐ The working Laws

2. Which of these people were sent to the workhouse? Tick **two**.

- ☐ the sick
- ☐ the wealthy
- ☐ the elderly
- ☐ the employed

3. **Find** and **copy** a word which means **squeezed**.

4. What food were people in the workhouse fed?

5. Tick to say whether each job was done by men or women.

Job	Men	Women
Scrubbing the walls and floors		
Working in the fields		
Breaking stones		
Sewing and weaving		

6. What was the name of the book written by Charles Dickens that is set in a workhouse.
Tick **one**.

- ☐ Bad Reputation
- ☐ Oliver Twist
- ☐ Cruel Teachers
- ☐ The Poor Laws

7. Why do you think it took a number of years for all workhouses to disappear? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

8. Why do you think people feared being sent to the workhouse?

Answers

1. What were workhouses introduced as part of? Tick **one**.

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- ☐ the employed

3. **Find** and **copy** a word which means **squeezed**.

crammed

4. What food were people in the workhouse fed?

People in the workhouse were fed bread, broth, cheese and occasionally meat.

5. Tick to say whether each job was done by men or women.

Job	Men	Women
Scrubbing the walls and floors		✓
Working in the fields	✓	
Breaking stones	✓	
Sewing and weaving		✓

6. What was the name of the book written by Charles Dickens that is set in a workhouse.

Tick **one**.

- ☐ Bad Reputation
- ☒ Oliver Twist
- ☐ Cruel Teachers
- ☐ The Poor Laws

7. Why do you think it took a number of years for all workhouses to disappear? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Pupil's own response, referring to the text, such as: I think it took a long time for all workhouses to disappear because there were a lot of people who lived there that would need to find a new place to live and new jobs. It would have taken a long time to move everyone as there were a lot of workhouses.

8. Why do you think people feared being sent to the workhouse?

Pupil's own response, referring to the text, such as: I think people feared going to the workhouse because the conditions were terrible. People had to do hard work and had a small amount of basic food, which you could miss if you did something wrong. People were also split up from their family and had to share beds.

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Workhouses were large buildings where poor people who had no home or job lived. It was introduced as part of the Poor Laws system, where those who were paupers could live and work. It was intended as a place for people to work themselves out of poverty, though many were seen as prisons for the poor, orphaned children, the sick, disabled, elderly and unmarried mothers.

Living in a workhouse was the last thing people wanted to do. If a man with a wife and children had to enter a workhouse, his whole family had to go with him. It was thought to be shameful because it meant he could not look after his own family and he could not get a job.

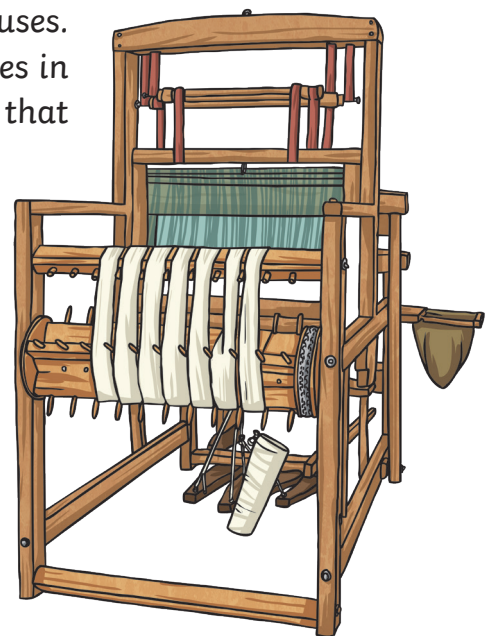
Men, women, and children were housed in different parts of the building and were kept apart as often as possible, even when not working. People were crammed into as small a space as possible, with most people having to share beds. This meant that if someone were to contract a disease, such as ringworm, it would quickly spread throughout the workhouse. This meant that many people fell ill and died due to these conditions.

Did You Know...?

Furniture in a workhouse was very basic and uncomfortable; mattresses were often stuffed sacks and most did not have pillows as these were seen as an unnecessary luxury.

Children had lessons in reading, writing, maths and religion for around three hours a day. However, in 1836, it was decided that writing was not important for poor children to learn so these lessons were no longer taught in workhouses. Teachers were often cruel and strict. There were rules in place against beating children but there are reports that some were hit with a ruler or stick in class. Girls were taught how to sew, as well as other skills that would help them become a maid when they left the workhouse at fourteen years old.

Food was small portions of plain, simple meals, usually bread, broth, cheese and occasionally meat. Second helpings were strictly forbidden and many people suffered from starvation during their time at the workhouse. It was a common punishment to miss mealtimes if you broke any rules.



Jobs in the Workhouse

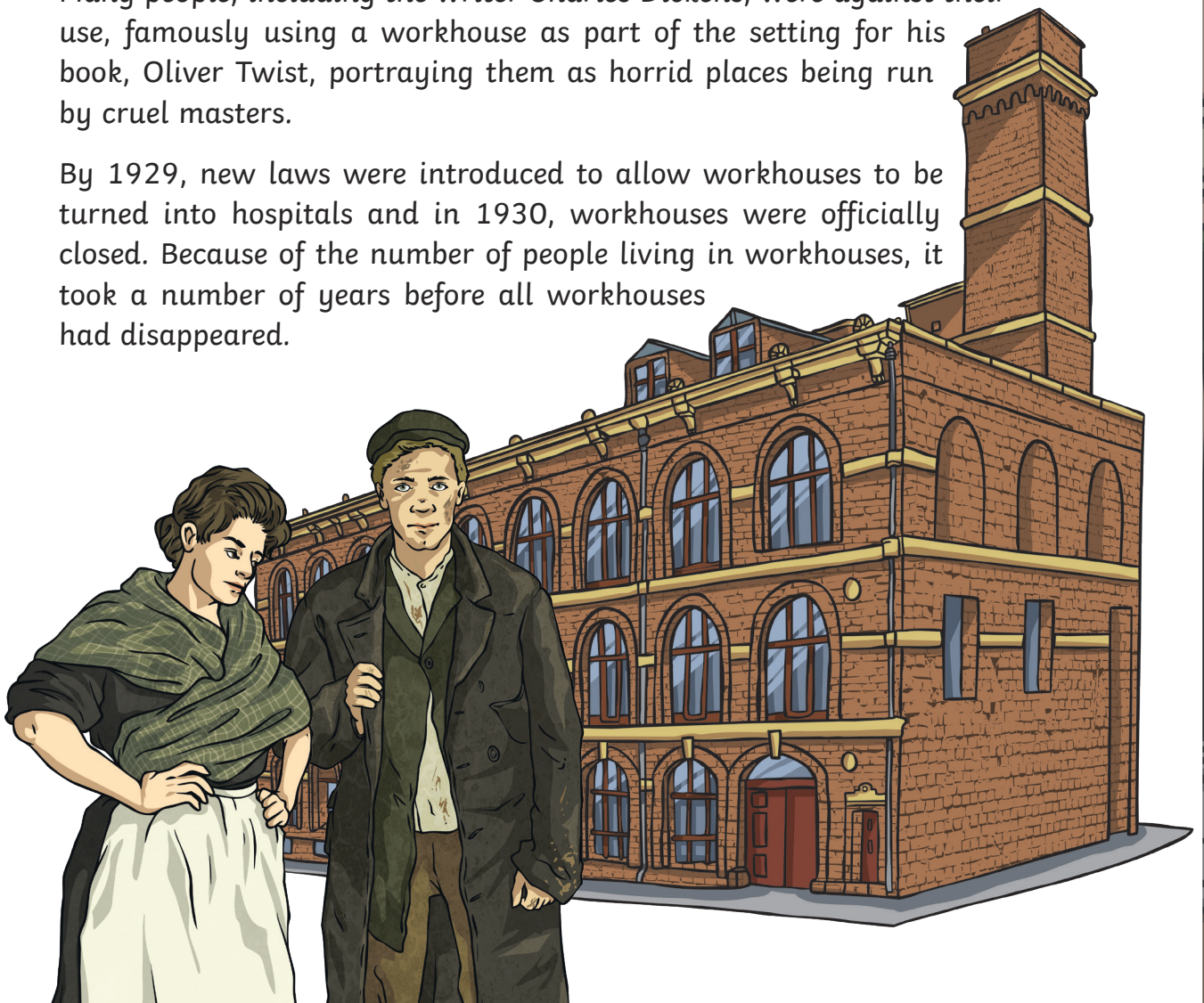
Jobs in the workhouse involved a lot of hard labour. Men were expected to perform exhausting tasks, such as stone breaking, grinding corn and chopping wood. Women were expected to complete domestic work, such as laundry, scrubbing the walls and floors and other general cleaning tasks. Both men and women took part in 'oakum', a task that involved unpicking old ropes for many hours at a time so they could be used on ships.

The working day in the workhouse was long. People would be woken early, around 5 a.m., and aside from prayers and meal times, were expected to work until they were sent to bed around 8 p.m.

Bad Reputation

Workhouses became known for their terrible conditions and high mortality rate. Many people, including the writer Charles Dickens, were against their use, famously using a workhouse as part of the setting for his book, *Oliver Twist*, portraying them as horrid places being run by cruel masters.

By 1929, new laws were introduced to allow workhouses to be turned into hospitals and in 1930, workhouses were officially closed. Because of the number of people living in workhouses, it took a number of years before all workhouses had disappeared.



Questions

1. Which of these is closest in meaning to the word **pauper**? Tick **one**.

- ☐ rich person
☐ poor person
☐ friendly
☐ cruel

2. Why would a man with a family not want to go to the workhouse?

3. Fill in the missing words.

Men, women and _____ were housed in different _____ of the building and were kept _____ as often as possible, even when not _____.

4. Name **three** subjects boys were taught at the workhouse.

- _____
- _____
- _____

5. Tick to say whether each job was done by men or women.

Job	Men	Women
Scrubbing the walls and floors		
Working in the fields		
Breaking stones		
Sewing and weaving		

6. Which writer used a workhouse as a setting in one of his books?

7. Why do you think diseases spread so quickly and easily in workhouses?

8. What do you think the best and worst aspects of the workhouses were? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Answers

1. Which of these is closest in meaning to the word **pauper**? Tick **one**.

- ☐ rich person
- ☒ poor person
- ☐ friendly
- ☐ cruel

2. Why would a man with a family not want to go to the workhouse?

Pupil's own response, such as: A man with a family would not want to go to the workhouse because his whole family would have to go there with him. It was also seen as shameful because he would be seen as not being able to look after his own family and get a job.

3. Fill in the missing words.

Men, women and **children** were housed in different **parts** of the building and were kept **apart** as often as possible, even when not **working**.

4. Name **three** subjects boys were taught at the workhouse.

Accept any three from reading, writing, maths and religion.

5. Tick to say whether each job was done by men or women.

Job	Men	Women
Scrubbing the walls and floors		✓
Working in the fields	✓	
Breaking stones	✓	
Sewing and weaving		✓

6. Which writer used a workhouse as a setting in one of his books?

Charles Dickens

7. Why do you think diseases spread so quickly and easily in workhouses?

Pupil's own response, such as: I think diseases spread quickly in workhouses because lots of people had to live together in a small space, even sharing beds. Also, people were fed very basic food and would have not been very healthy to fight against disease.

8. What do you think the best and worst aspects of the workhouses were? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Pupil's own response, such as: I think the best aspect of the workhouses is that they gave somewhere for the poor and homeless to live and work. I think the worst aspects of the workhouses is having to work very hard and live in very uncomfortable conditions, such as not having a pillow on your bed.