

The New Poor Law Of 1834 Coursework Assignments

Question 3

Study Sources E, F, G, H and I. Use the evidence of these sources, and your knowledge, to explain why there was so much controversy over the workhouse system in the 1830s and 1840s.

There was so much controversy in the North because the conditions of the workhouses were far worse than in the South. This was due to the urbanisation of the North, and of the inner city slums that had formed around the growing industrial areas. The workhouses were designed and instructed to have worse conditions than the lowest paid labourer. In most cases this could not be achieved, because the lowest paid labourers were starving and living in a single room with their whole family. Some workhouses had become harsh in the extreme with the aim of having worse conditions than the lowest paid labourer. An example of this extreme harshness can be found at a workhouse in Andover. In 1845, a serious scandal broke out around this workhouse, Parliament investigated the conditions in the workhouse and there was outrage. The men worked by crushing old bones for fertiliser, but they were so starved that they had been eating the marrow from the rotting bones.

Source E gives an example of a Northern, urban writer in the late 1830s that voiced an opinion against the workhouse system. Richard Oastler was a humanitarian, who had previously campaigned for the 10 ½ hr working day in the textile industry.

He compares the workhouses to 'Bastilles' which were used as prisons during the French revolution. He creates a bleak and stark image in the reader's mind of the workhouses. He also uses emotive language, 'wife torn from me'; this evokes a great sympathy from the reader. This also displays the extent of the segregation of families in the workhouse.

The writer uses the word 'liberty' twice; the word was extensively used during the French revolution as a slogan for freedom. Oastler uses liberty in order to bring forth images of revolution and rebellion. Liberty also means freedom, 'man shall give up his liberty', which literally means a man must give up his freedom to live.

Source F is a report from a Southern, rural Parish which is the total opposite from the North. It is written by a middle to upper class rate-payer who is in charge of administering the Poor Law in the Linton area. Because of his position he will support the Poor Law. This passage was written in the middle 1830s when there were plentiful

harvests, good wages and reasonable amounts of work. This meant that the conditions of the workhouse would not be bad. Because the lowest paid labourer would live in fairly good conditions compared to the North. 'Our progress upon the whole, as in the reduction of able-bodied pauperism, is most satisfactory'. This tells us that the workhouse test has succeeded in deterring the able-bodied poor from entering the workhouse. 'We have now scarcely a single application from persons of that description', by 'that description' he refers to the able-bodied paupers. He implies from the above statement that the able-bodied poor have jobs, because they are no longer applying for a workhouse placement. But this is not an accurate perception for the drop-off in applications, the reason why there are less people applying is because they have succeeded in applying the workhouse test.

'The behaviour of the poor, the farmers bear testament in their improvement to civility, their greater care to keep, their places', this statement explains that since the introduction of tougher workhouses the poor have been more civil towards their employers. They also take greater care in keeping their jobs, for fear of ending up in a workhouse.

Parents would increase 'their efforts to get their children into service'. Service would mean that they would become servants in a manor house; they did this so that their children would not end up in a workhouse.

Source G is written by the Earl of Harwicke who shares a similar point of view as the writer in Source F, and is also from the same region, a southern, rural parish. The writer states that 'all farmers that I have spoken with say that they are more respectful and civil in their behaviour'; he compares their attitudes with that when the Speedhamland system was in place. Then, their behaviour and civility was believed to be appalling and that they had no respect for any others. He also uses their improvement in their behaviour as justification of the effectiveness of the New Poor Law.

The main aim of the New Poor Law was to reduce the expenses of the Old Poor Law.

The Earl supports this aim greatly in saying that 'the savings have also been enormous'; this directly agrees with Source F, it says exactly what Source F was implying.

He also mentions that the amount of able-bodied men applying for relief has fallen dramatically from 100 men to 17-20 each winter. But he ignores that men are out of work and are not applying for relief due to the workhouse test.

Source H is a drawing of the attack on Stockport workhouse in 1842. Stockport is close to Manchester, which was a booming industrial area at this time; the drawing depicts a Northern, urban Parish.

This Source is a good example of the failure of the workhouse system in the North, compared to the success in the South which is shown in Sources F and G.

The drawing illustrates rioters handing out bread to the able-bodied poor who do not wish to enter the workhouse but do need the banned outdoor-relief. Because of the cyclical nature of employment in the North, the people are desperate for relief, because outdoor relief was banned by the 1834 Poor Law Act. If they did enter the workhouse they would lose their house, which they would need when they would be employed again.

The 1834 Act did not take into consideration the nature of employment in the North which was nearly totally industrial. Outdoor relief suited the poor perfectly, because it would give them enough to tide them over until they could go back to work.

The children in the foreground of the drawing are there to invoke sympathy in the viewer, to show that all ages are affected by poverty.

Source I is from a history textbook published in the 1980s. It is a completely neutral source, which displays factual information from economic point of view. It only gives figures of the expenditure of the New Poor Law; it does not give reasons for the statistics. 'In 1851 this sum had fallen to below £5million, in spite of the rise of 29% in the population', this shows that the number of paupers would have risen. But the amount of money spent on the poor rates had fallen; this tells us that the number of paupers applying for relief has fallen even though the population had risen. Only the people who were claiming relief had fallen, not the actual number of poor. This implies that the workhouse test had succeeded in deterring the able-bodied poor. This source supports the views of Sources F and G.

The workhouse system was harsh, the inmates had to wear uniforms, they had to work for 10hrs a day and they had to eat a sparse, simple menu. They also were under a repetitive routine and strict rule. Although the conditions were not ideal they were designed to help the deserving poor.

Humanitarians believed that the workhouses had become too harsh. They questioned whether to help a person it was required to lower their living conditions.

The most amount of controversy would be brought forth by Source E; this showed to an extent what really happened in the workhouse system. This would show the public what 'really' went on in the workhouses, whereas the other sources, barring Source H, all supported the workhouse system.