

The new poor law of 1834 essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Study Source P; use the sources, and your knowledge, to explain whether the cartoonist (Source P) gives an accurate representation of the changes brought about by the Poor Law Act of 1834.

Source P gives an exaggerated depiction, comparing the effect of the New Poor Law before and after 1834. The drawing that shows a workhouse room before 1834 is obviously incorrect. The man is displayed as opulent, which would certainly not be the case in a Workhouse. All people who would have entered would have been poor. The man is wearing wealthy clothes, with a tablecloth and an expensive table with fine cutlery and plates. This particular portrayal is inaccurate; the inmates would have in fact worn uniforms and would not have had a tablecloth or such fine cutlery. The conditions are very comfortable for the man in the supposed earlier drawing. In a real workhouse of this time the conditions would have been better than when the New Poor Law was introduced, but not as affluent as in the drawing.

The picture on the right shows an eviscerated inmate with an obese master, to show a stark contrast between the two. The drawing depicts a prison like cell, with bars on the windows and manacles on the wall. This is completely false, the buildings from the outside were designed to look like prisons but that is as far as the likeness went. The inmate is shown in rags, trying to invoke sympathy in the viewer. They would have actually worn a uniform, and no their own clothes.

The food on the table is only a piece of bread, not a Christmas meal. The workhouse diet, in Source C, states that they would have been given a ‘special fare of beef, plum pudding and beer’. It would have provided a bland

but filling diet, which would keep them at an appropriate weight. The man is very skeletal, this is an incorrect portrayal, because the meals were specifically designed to give the inmate suitable nutrients and energy for the work they carries out day-to-day. All meals were eaten together, so the pictures version of the man's solitary confinement is unrealistic.

The inmate seems to be sitting on a block of stone or a bench. This is also untrue; they would have all had chairs and wooden tables to eat at during meal hours. A possible explanation for the solitary confinement and restricted diet of the man may be because he committed a refractory offence. Source D states that any 'Refractory pauper shall be punished by confinement to a separate room for 24 hours with alteration of diet', although this can explain why the man is in solitary confinement the diet would have not been restricted as far as a single loaf of bread. The refractory room, shown in Source B, would have not had manacles or bars on the windows.

Both depictions show the segregation experiences by the inmates at the workhouses throughout Britain, this was the worst part of workhouse life. There were many petty rules and regulations that the inmates had to follow. The uniform which they had to wear was another way of institutionalising the poor who entered the workhouse, to demoralise them into becoming one of many.

The rule where they had to be in bed by eight, meant that they could lead no normal life, their own lives were no longer their own, it also felt like they were children. The workhouse was designed to have worse conditions than

that of the lowest paid labourer, so even the very poor on the outside of the workhouse would look down upon those in the workhouse. It was considered the lowest of the low, the experienced a lot of stigma because of this.

Source A supports Source P; the Royal Commission thought the conditions of the workhouse were too comfortable, so they suggested that the workhouse test to be implemented. They also suggested that to help the workhouse test to become more disinterring, they would build the workhouses so that they looked liked prisons. This can be directly linked to the ‘ after 1834’ picture in Source P that shows a prison like cell with manacles on the wall. The Commission also say that they believe too many able-bodied poor are entering the workhouse. This is also backs up the ‘ before 1834’ picture in Source P, because the picture shows a wealthy man in a workhouse, although the picture is exaggerated it shows what was happening at the time.

Although Source B does not offer much to back up Source P, it does show that there was a refractory room where people would be put into solitary confinement for committing a refractory offence. This is shown in both pictures in Source P.

Source C is a factual piece of primary information from a Cambridgeshire workhouse. Source C shows that the inmates would receive very filling meals, which would give them enough energy for the work they carried out. It also states that the inmates had a ‘ special Christmas fare of beef, plum pudding and beer’. This Source goes against Source P, because it gives

evidence that the inmates received more than a loaf of bread for Christmas which Source P suggests.

Source D supports Source P in that it gives factual information that the inmates of a workhouse would be punished by a restriction of diet and solitary confinement. It states ‘ a refractory pauper shall be punished by confinement to a separate room for 24 hours with alteration of diet’, Source P shows in both pictures a punishment of solitary confinement, but only the ‘ after 1834’ shows the restriction of diet.

Source E does agree with Source P in a number of ways. The manacles on the walls in ‘ after 1834’ in Source P are backed up in Source E by the comparison of the workhouses to ‘ those hellish Poor Law Bastilles’. A Bastille is a French prison which confirms the bars on the windows and the overall look of a prison in Source P. Source E tells of the segregation that is shown in Source P, ‘ wife torn from me’ although this is a slightly exaggerated it shows what went on in the workhouses.

Source E also states ‘ that before he shall eat a piece of bread he shall go into prison’; this can be directly linked to Source P. In it, it shows a man about to eat a piece of bread, and from Source E this tells us that this man has had to give up his freedom to do this. Although Source E does support Source P very well it is a biased piece of information. Richard Oastler was a well known humanitarian; he had previously campaigned for the 10 1/2 hour movement in the factories.

Source F and G are basically the same, they tell of how the Poor Law has freed up a lot more money, and that far less able-bodied poor are applying

for a workhouse placement. The two Sources do support Source P, this is because they show that there is a 'reduction of able-bodied pauperism', which is reflected in Source P in the 'after 1834' picture showing a very poor person in the workhouse compared to the very wealthy person in the workhouse in the 'before 1834' picture. This shows that there really were less able-bodied paupers applying for relief after the New Poor Law as introduced.

Source H shows a riot outside a workhouse in Stockport in 1842. This Source does support Source P, but only in a very circumstantial way. Three men in the left of the picture are handing out loaves of bread to the poor; this supports Source P in that they did not receive enough food. It also shows the amount of people that the New Poor Law was not helping. This Source is an exaggerated view of what really happened. The artist has purposely put children in the very foreground of the picture so to invoke sympathy within the viewer, so that they will see the New Poor Law has done this to the poor children.

Source I is a totally neutral source that partially supports Source P. The source simply shows the financial ways in which the New Poor Law has succeeded. But the money that has been saved may have come from the dramatic fall of the conditions in the workhouses. Source P shows this in the 'after 1834' picture by giving a stark contrast between the before and after pictures of 1834. So the viewer can see that the governments' initiative of saving money has worked well, to the deprecation of the inmates living conditions.

Source J gives a sensationalised story by a newspaper of the lengths people were willing to go to in order to escape the workhouse. It tells of a father who attempted to murder 'his 14 year old daughter with a scythe' so that he would not have to be separated from her when he grew older. Although this is a highly exaggerated story it does indicate that this had happened before and that it was not uncommon. The conditions experienced by the man in the 'after 1834' were what the father and probably many others tried to escape from.

Source K is a biased piece from the Baxters 'Book of Bastilles'. This Source is very similar to Source J, in that it shows the lengths people were willing to go to in order to avoid entering a workhouse. Almost half of the actual extract is pure opinion, 'having chosen death by starvation rather than enter a workhouse under present conditions. It supports Source P because it shows that people wanted to avoid going into solitary confinement, with a restricted diet and manacles on wall that is shown in the 'after 1834' picture. Source K offers only a relatively small amount of unbiased information, and because it supports Source P it also puts the usefulness of this Source in question.

Source L disagrees totally with Source P. It states that 'the situation is splendid' and the 'apartments are airy and roomy'. This however is untrue, the living conditions of the inmates was not as bad as in Source P but was also not as good as in Source L. The inmates lived in dormitories often quite full, so would not have been 'airy' or 'roomy'. Source L was written by an anonymous writer, which puts the validity of this Source into question as well.

Sources M and N were either written by Charles Dickens or vetted by him to be included in his fictitious novel 'Oliver Twist' published in 1838. Although these two sources agree very strongly with Source P, they are biased towards the condemnation of the New Poor Law. Charles Dickens wrote his novel to make a profit; he made his novel sensationalised in order to achieve his aim. He also wrote the novel to directly criticise the New Poor Law, this was mainly because of his childhood which was based around a working class family. The Source agrees with Source P in areas such as the lack of food, the strict rules and regulations and that the master was usually a fat man and the inmates were very ill-nourished.

Source O agrees and disagrees on some points with Source P. It agrees that there were savings to the ratepayers because the conditions within the workhouse had fallen so much. The sources disagree with each other on the fact that in Source O it states 'the condition of the aged and infirm poor has been improved'. Anyone who was in a workhouse would have experienced the depredation of the living conditions whether they were deserving or able-bodied poor. The other issue that disagrees slightly with Source P is that it states 'a beneficial change is gradually developing itself amongst all classes of paupers', this means that the New Poor Law is helping all people, which in Source P it is clearly not.

I think that due to all the evidence, Source P does not give an accurate representation of the changes brought about by the New Poor Law. The cartoonist has exaggerated far too much in the depiction of both scenes. They can be undermined by primary, factual information which proves that Source P is an inaccurate piece of information.