

GALLERY BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF POVERTY

Like most societies, Britain has always had its most vulnerable people - the poor. However, attitudes towards the most vulnerable people in society have not always been the same. In Tudor times, for example, poor people caught begging could be whipped and chased out of the town or village where they tried to beg. In the 19th century, the poor who could not look after themselves had to go to the workhouse. The harsh conditions, but above all the shame of the workhouse, meant that some people starved rather than enter it.

By the early 1900s attitudes were beginning to change. When the Liberal government came to power in 1906 Liberal MPs were convinced that there had to be government action to help the poor, the old and people who were unemployed. What convinced them?

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Social reformers like Charles Booth (in London) and Seebohm Rowntree (in York) carried out detailed studies into the lives of the poor. Their results were truly shocking. Their studies showed just how many people lived on the poverty line - in York it was over a quarter of the population. The studies also showed just how bad life was for the very poor - terrible housing, poor health, bad diet and an endless struggle just to feed the family.



BACKGROUND SOURCE 1
A plan drawn in 1900 showing packed and unsanitary working class housing in the Boundary Street area of Bethnal Green (PRO ref: PRO 30/69/1824)



BACKGROUND SOURCE 2
A table showing the weekly diet of a working family in Liverpool. It comes from 'How the Casual Labourer Lives', a study looking at life for the poor in Liverpool in 1909. (By permission of the British Library: AC2472)

Other studies made people and politicians aware that the most vulnerable in society were also often the worst off. When people were too old to work, they had to rely on their family or charity to feed and house them. Children living in the poorest areas were vulnerable to disease, especially in their early years. They were also vulnerable to exploitation. Employers used child labour because children were cheap. Sometimes even parents forced their children to work because they needed the earnings. There were other abuses which children suffered as well, including malnourishment and even violent abuse. It is not surprising that in the poor districts the attendance of the children was very high. For many of these children school was a warm, safe place compared to home and work.

THE REASONS FOR THE PROBLEMS

The main reason why poor children and the old suffered so much was poverty, but why was there so much poverty?

Old people who were poor were poor because they could no longer work and earn money. During their working lives they had not earned enough to put money aside to keep them in their old age. Children were poor because their parents were poor.

Until the early 1900s most people thought that the poor were poor because they wasted their money on drink. However, social reformers showed that poverty was caused by a number of key factors:

- Unemployment or partial unemployment (the inability to get a job which was permanent)
- The death of a wage earner in the family
- Illness
- Low wages
- Large families

There were also reasons behind the reasons. In the 19th century Britain had been the world's leading industrial nation. By the early 1900s other countries like Germany and the USA were competing strongly with Britain. This took jobs away from Britain and left people in poverty.

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As people realised that poverty was not really the fault of the poor they began to support the view that the government should do something to help the young, the old and the unemployed.

WAS ANYTHING DONE TO HELP THE POOR BEFORE THE LIBERAL REFORMS?

A lot was done before the Liberal reforms began in 1906. The Conservative party passed a number of acts like the Unemployed Workmen's Act in 1903, and the Employment of Children Act 1903. Local councils passed byelaws on issues like child labour. They also cleared slum housing and built new housing for the poor.



BACKGROUND SOURCE 3
A plan drawn in 1900 showing working class housing in the Boundary Street area of Bethnal Green after it had been cleared and rebuilt by the London County Council
(PRO ref: PRO 30/69/1824)

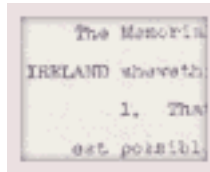
The problem was that a lot of the action depended on the attitude of the local authorities. Some councils did take action. Others did not, usually because of the cost of measures like building new housing.

WHY DID THE LIBERALS TAKE ACTION IN 1906?

But why did the government take action in 1906 as opposed to any other date? One reason was that the Liberals were faced with so much evidence of such terrible poverty, hardship and ill health. Other factors also played their part.

In 1906 there were young and ambitious politicians who became part of the government. Two of the most important were David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. Both of these men felt that the state of Britain's poor was a national disgrace.

There were also political reasons for introducing welfare reforms. The Liberals were concerned about the growing popularity of the new Labour Party. They thought that welfare reforms might attract voters to their party instead of Labour. Another factor was national security. In 1899 Britain went to war in South Africa. When the army called for volunteers to join up it was found that around 50% of those who applied were unfit to join the army.



BACKGROUND SOURCE 4
Extract from a document produced by the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain commenting on the state of health of people in Britain
(PRO ref: PC 8/612)