Did the treatment of the poor improve after the 1834 Poor Law?
More than 6,000,000 people visited the Great Exhibition in 1851. But what about the people who did not come? Among those who did not visit would have been poor people without means to support themselves. Had life improved for them since the introduction of the Poor law of 1834?

Before 1834 there was no one way of providing help for the poor. The local parish could build a workhouse if it wanted to and make the poor work for their keep. The parish could decide to give the poor money when they needed it.

Some used the Speenhamland System; this linked the amount of money handed out to the price of bread and the number of people in the family. But in 1834 all the different methods of helping the poor were abolished and replaced by a new one, the New Poor Law.

The New Poor Law was introduced by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which was based upon a report published in 1832. This report had been written by Edwin Chadwick. He wanted the poor to be helped to support themselves. He wanted children to be educated and taught a trade, but many of his ideas were forgotten when the Act was put into force.
The Poor Law Amendment Act set up the Poor Law Commission in London, which was responsible for the organisation of Poor Relief throughout England and Wales. Parishes were grouped into 'Unions' and each Union had to build a workhouse.

Plans for the construction of Workhouses were provided by the Commission, which also sent out rules and regulations. Unions were told how Workhouses were to be run and how paupers, the term used for people who entered the Workhouse, were to be treated.

After 1834, anybody who wanted help had to go into the Workhouse. Outdoor relief, giving money to people living in their own homes, was banned, unless the people were old or sick. In the Workhouse, the conditions were to be worse than anything that people might find outside; this was the idea of 'less eligibility'.

To make sure that Unions kept to the regulations, the Commission sent inspectors to every Workhouse at least once a year. These inspectors were called Assistant Commissioners. They wrote reports on all the Workhouses and sent them to the Commission in London.

The New Poor Law was supposed to be more efficient, but did the care of the poor really improve after the Poor Law Amendment Act?
Edwin Chadwick was the man behind the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. He wanted to create a new system of poor relief, where people were trained to help themselves. He believed that the existing systems encouraged laziness by simply handing out money every week. Chadwick intended that workhouses should offer education and training for young and old, but unfortunately his aims were misunderstood by many people, including some assistant Poor Law Commissioners; these were the men who were given the task of inspecting workhouses and making sure that they obeyed the regulations. They often believed that the main aim of the New Poor Law was simply to save money and punish the poor. Consequently, there were many examples of early workhouses being run as cheaply as possible. The result was that the poor were very badly treated. The most famous example of this was the Andover Scandal of 1846 where inmates fought over bones and gristle. It was the fact that many of the poor in workhouses were so unhealthy, that encouraged Chadwick to investigate the public health in towns. This led him to publish his report in 1842.
This is a statement given by a 13 yr old boy to a commission about child workers which includes information about Halifax workhouse. It illustrates the role of the workhouse in a young orphan's life.

No. 64. William Hollingsworth, aged 13. June 9:

I have no father or mother; my father was a shoemaker and has been dead five years, and my mother eleven; I lived with my sister at Crossfield six months after and rather better, and then went to the old workhouse; I was then apprenticed by the overseers of the parish of Halifax to Joseph Morton, the brickmaker, in the township of Southowram, where I remained two years, when he died, and I came here for a little while. Jonathan Oldfield, a celler, living at Bradshaw-lane, made application to the Board of Guardians for an apprentice; I was willing to work for him or anybody else, and went with him by consent of the Board on trial for a month; if I had remained with him I should have been bound until I was 21; I stayed with him five days; he gave me porridge for breakfast at half-past five, and then I went with his other two apprentices, with whom I slept, to the pit; each of us took a cake and a half for our dinners; we had no time to stop to eat it, but took it as we hurried; the first night I worked in the pit, which was last Thursday [the 3rd inst.], we remained until ten o'clock at night, and then all three came away together; the second night [Friday] we stopped until nine, third night until half-past eight, and on the Monday until a quarter to eight; we had nothing during the whole of those days but the cake and half each, and nothing to drink; there was no water that we could get in the pit's bottom, and they would not allow us to go up to drink; I was very thirsty at times; my master never beat me, but he cursed enough at me because I was not sharp enough with the corves. I hurried without shoes one day, but was obliged to put them on again because the ground hurt my feet; the other apprentices told me that they worked until 9 and 11 o'clock at night regular. It was Mr. Joseph Steck's Royd Pit that I worked in; I ran away from him Tuesday [yesterday] morning because he worked me so late; I was so tired when I got home to his house that I did not think I could stand it; after I left him I made application to come into the workhouse again; I would rather work if I had a good master; I have been to day-school and Sunday-school, and can read and write very well; I heard my master say last Sunday to another man who looks after his row, that the four cutters and three hurriers that he employs earns every day 14s.; one of his apprentices is a cutter, the other is a hurrier; besides them he has three other cutters.

(Signed)  
William Hollingsworth.

I have heard the foregoing evidence of William Hollingsworth read over, and from my knowledge of the lad believe it to be strictly true.

(Signed)  
W. Dyer,  
Master of Union House.
Source 1

Task

1a Why did the Overseers make this report?

1b What did the Overseers find was wrong with the Workhouse?

1c Why do you think conditions like this existed?
This is the report of the Overseers of Huddersfield in May 1847, after they received a letter from Thomas Tatham, the Medical Officer for the northern district of Huddersfield.

HUDDERSFIELD WORKHOUSE ABOMINATIONS.—ANDOVER IN THE SHADE.

Medical relief and general treatment of the sick poor.—To the ratepayers of the township of Huddersfield.—The undersigned, being overseers of the poor, having laid it in charge by the ratepayers in vestry assembled, to institute a searching inquiry into the manner in which the sick poor are, and have been, treated in the Huddersfield workhouse, and having ascertained that charges have been duly made to the poor-law authorities, which in cruelty and disregard surpass even the facts that earned for Andover such an unenviable notoriety; and having, moreover, learned the facts connected with the question of medical relief for the township, as exemplified in the extremely hard case of Mr. T. R. Tatham, who for the last four years has been fighting the battle of the poor against niggardliness and parsimony, and standing up for the true interest of the ratepayers against real extravagance and short-sightedness, deem it incumbent on them to call the ratepayers together, in open vestry, that the facts of the whole case may be made known, and such steps taken as may be deemed most fitting to wipe away the disgrace that will otherwise indelibly attach to the township.

OVERSEERS’ REPORT.

The overseers of the poor of the township of Huddersfield, having received it in instruction from a vestry meeting of the township (assembled on the 2nd day of March last, to nominate the proper persons to fill the said office of overseers), to institute an inquiry into certain allegations then and there made, as to the general treatment the sick poor had received in the Huddersfield workhouse, beg to say that they have complied with the request contained in the resolution of the said vestry meeting, and have thereupon to report as follows:—

The overseers have had before them the medical officer of the northern division of the township, (in which district the workhouse is situate), and also several of the parties who have acted as nurses to the sick poor, both in the workhouse and in the temporary fever hospital. They have also made it their business to prosecute certain inquiries at the workhouse itself; and the result of all is, that they are forced to the conclusion that the sick poor have been most shamefully neglected; that they have been and still are devoid of the necessary articles of clothing and bedding; that they have been sufferer to remain for weeks at a time in the most filthy and disgusting state; that patients have been allowed to remain for nine weeks together without a change of linen or of bed clothing; that beds in which patients suffering in typhus have died, one after another, have been again and again and repeatedly used for fresh patients, without any change or attempt at purification; that the said beds were only bags of straw and shavings, for the most part laid on the floor, and that the whole swarmed with lice; that patients suffering in infectious fever were almost constantly put together in one bed; that it has frequently happened that one would be ragingly delirious, when the other was dying; and that it is a fact that a living patient has occupied the same bed with a corpse for a considerable period after death; that the patients have been for months together without properly appointed nurses to attend to them; that there has been for a considerable time none but male paupers to attend on female patients; that when the poor sick creatures were laid in the most abject and helpless state—so debilitated as to pass their defecation as they lay, they have been suffered to remain in the most infested state possible, hemorrhaged in their own excrement, for days together, and not even washed; that the necessary stimulants ordered by the medical officer have been withheld; that when patients have been unattended in the free administration of wine, the fever hospital has been left without for more than forty-eight hours at a time; that death occurred amongst the patients from which such stimulant was withheld; which the medical officer attributes to this very cause; that the party whose duty it was to have provided such wine, was repeatedly applied to for it, both by the nurses at the hospital and the medical officer.

(PRO ref: MH12/15070)

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source1.htm
Source 2

Task

2a Why did Thomas Tatham write the letter?

2b List all the things that he claimed were wrong with the Huddersfield Workhouse?

2c Was Thomas Tatham qualified to make comments on the workhouse?

Look back at source 1

2d Is Thomas Tatham complaining about the same things that were mentioned in the Overseers' Report?

2e Had the conditions in the workhouse improved after the Overseers' Report in May 1847?

Look back at source 1
Source 2

This is another letter, which was sent in June 1847 by Thomas Tatham to the Chairman of the Board of Guardians in Huddersfield. Thomas Tatham was the Medical Officer for the north of Huddersfield who had already complained about the workhouse a number of times.

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source2.htm
This man, with the help of another man, named Mark Bradley, are the only individuals I have seen to attend upon the wants of both Male and Female Patients. I have never seen a man assist in the Female Wards; those who have to make the calls of Nature. Besides I have observed three individuals lying in their own filth, with the hands and faces smeared with it too whole days without being washed. The Names are

Benjamin Carr... Died on the 6th of June
James Till... Do - 15th June
Bridget Eliz. Roughton... Do - 18th June

The regular administration of medicine prescribed
to those
and those and attention. Patients who are too weak
to feed or help themselves are very much neglected.
I will here remark that, when a Patient arrives at
a certain state of weakness and debility, as much
depends upon good nursing as Medicine. It therefore
become extremely painful to me as Medical Officer to
find my efforts frustrated by the omission of their
adjutant. I have had so much experience in the early
and present period of my Professional career as Medical
Officials to Parish Hospitals as to be fully convinced of the
utter worthlessness of Pauper Nurses unless self-impressed
and controlled by a proper paid Nurse.
Hoping that due attention will be paid to these remarks

Yours obedient Servant
Thomas Retallick.
Task

3a How many inmates were in the workhouse?

3b Choose one day and work out what food was consumed in the workhouse?

3c Were the inmates of the workhouse getting a healthy diet? What was wrong with the diet?

Are there any signs that the matron realised that the diet was not good enough?

Look back at sources 1 and 2 and think about what you have learnt from source 3.

3d Do these sources suggest that the Overseers had made a serious attempt to reform the workhouse after Thomas Tatham's letters?

3e If you were in charge of the workhouse, what changes would you make to improve the conditions?

Source 4
This is the dietary for the Huddersfield Workhouse. This was the list of meals that were supplied to the inmates of the workhouse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Dinner</th>
<th>Supper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>5 lbs. of flour boiled with 4 1/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of beef, 6 1/2 eggs</td>
<td>6 lbs. of flour boiled with 11/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of fish, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
<td>6 lbs. of flour boiled with 11/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of fish, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>3 lbs. of flour boiled with 4 1/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of beef, 6 1/2 eggs, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
<td>6 lbs. of flour boiled with 11/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of fish, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
<td>6 lbs. of flour boiled with 11/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of fish, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>5 lbs. of flour boiled with 4 1/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of beef, 6 1/2 eggs, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
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<td>6 lbs. of flour boiled with 11/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of fish, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>3 lbs. of flour boiled with 4 1/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of beef, 6 1/2 eggs, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
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<td>Friday</td>
<td>5 lbs. of flour boiled with 4 1/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of beef, 6 1/2 eggs, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
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<td>6 lbs. of flour boiled with 11/2 gallons Old Smith, 1 1/2 lbs. of fish, 1 1/2 lbs. of chicken</td>
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</table>

*The notice when the diet is settled, that the diet is to be kept to, and that the sick and infirm to be kept to 1/2 of the diet, and that no deviation from the diet is to be allowed.*

*The Old Women have a Quarters of an Ounce of sugar, and half an Ounce of their allowance for a week, and the Old Infirm a Quarters of a Penny, which is to be allowed for a week, and if they are allowed for a week, it is to be kept to, and no deviation from the diet is to be allowed.*

**(PRO ref: MH12/15070)**

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source3.htm
Source 4

Task

4a In what ways are the complaints the same as those made in:

i) the letter from Thomas Tatham
ii) the first report
iii) the dietary?

4b Look back at the first four sources, and write an account of what happened in the Huddersfield workhouse from 1847-8.
Source 4

This is part of a second report made by the Overseers of the Workhouse in June 1848.

SUPPLEMENT TO THE LEEDS MERCURY.

JUNE 10, 1848

THE HUDDERSFIELD WORKHOUSE INQUIRY.

OFFICIAL INVESTIGATION.

The following extract from the Overseers' report, will show the principal charges upon which the inquiry was instituted:—

With regard to the present condition of the sick poor at the workhouse, the Overseers have to report, that in the new hospital they have been but little better attended to than they were in the temporary fever hospital, as before detailed. They are now almost without clothing and bedding; beds for them have to be made up on the floor; their beds are but bags of straw, which when laid on bed stocks, do not keep the cords from cutting their bodies; on these bags of straw both male and female patients have to lie through all the rackings of fever and other painful diseases, from week end to week end, their persons sore and whaled with the hardness of their lying. That their covering is but old rags may be judged from the fact, that for twenty-three beds in that hospital, on the 27th of last April, there were but seven blankets, thirty sheets, twenty-one pillow-cases, and fifteen rugs. From the opening of that hospital to the present time, there have been none but pauper nurses to attend on the sick; at the present time there is but a male pauper to attend on both male and female patients; but still the practice obtains of placing two fever patients in one bed; that from the want of needful changes, the bed clothing, among which fever patients have died, is obliged to be used for other patients, without being washed.
Of the general treatment of the poor in the workhouse, the Overseers have to report that the house is, and has been for a considerable period, crowded out with inmates; that there are forty children occupying one room eight yards by five; that these children sleep four, five, six, seven, and even ten, in one bed; that thirty females live in another room of similar size; and that fifty adult males have to cram into a room seven and a half yards long by six yards wide; that the diet of the establishment has been and still is, insufficient; that four shillings worth of shin of beef, or leg o' mutton, with forty-two pounds of potatoes, have been made to serve for "soup" for 150 inmates; that the quantity, in gallons, required of this wash, for the household, is 27; that three gills of this "soup," with one fourth of an oaten cake, forms one of the dinners of the establishment; that ten gallons of old milk per day have been made to serve for two meals for an average number of 130 individuals, for a quarter of a year together,—being little more than one gill per head per day; that the old women are allowed 1/4 of a lb. of sugar and 1/4 an oz. of tea each, for a week's consumption; that the clothing of the establishment is miserably deficient; that there is no clothing in stock; that a great proportion of the inmates are obliged to wear their own clothes; that others have little better than rags to cover them; that instances have been known where the nakedness of even females has not been covered; that there are at present but 65 blankets fit for use in the establishment, to fit up 79 beds; that there are but 106 sheets for these 79 beds, being 50 short of a pair each; that there is in consequence no change of bed linen whatever; that when cleansed the beds have to be stripped, and the linen hurried through the wash-tub, dried, and on to the beds again for the same night; and that there are throughout the entire establishment the most unmistakable signs of bad arrangement, shortsightedness, real extravagance, waste of the rate-payers' money, and want of comfort, cleanliness, health, and satisfaction amongst the poor.

(PRO ref: MH 12/15070)
Source 5

Task

Look back at source 3

5a In what ways is this dietary different from Huddersfield's?

5b What evidence is there that some people received special treatment?

5c Which dietary is better, Reigate or Huddersfield? List five reasons why you have made your choice.

Source 5

This is the dietary for the Reigate Workhouse in Surrey.

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source5.htm
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Breakfast</th>
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<td>Men</td>
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</table>

**Note:**
- Bread: Men 1½ per day, Women ¾ per day.
- Women 125 8° - Sugar 8° 8°.
- Children under 9 years of age to be served at discretion; above 9 to be allowed the same as Women, sick to be served as directed by the Medical Officer.
Source 6

Task

6a Write down the names of the people on the list and how much relief they had been allowed by the Board of Guardians.

6b How does the Board explain each payment?

6c Why do you think the Assistant Commissioner wanted the payments explained?
This is part of a letter sent from the Reigate Union to an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner. His job was to inspect the Unions in his area and make sure that they were obeying the rules laid down by the 1834 Act. The letter explains why the Union paid outdoor relief to people living outside the workhouse which was not encouraged. Wages are given in pounds and shillings.
In this Case the Man broke his Leg and was...taken to the Public House at Sheffield. The Bill for £3 was not for Medical Relief he having been...attended to this Case no expense would...have been incurred.

Thomas Martin, aged 48, Wife 44, six...children all at Home, Nov. 1st 18...
This Man's Wages 18 1/2d. week. Allowed 6d...
for the week.

Ambrose Knight 64, Wife 40, six children under 12. Wages 12 1/2d. week, as they only sometimes...unable to work. It is allowed regularly 5 1/2...

The permanent Relief is intended to be taken off...and his Case will in future be brought forward...when he may be unable to work.

(PRO ref: MH 12/12575)
Task

7a When did the Assistant Poor Law Commissioner visit the workhouse? When had he made his last visit? Did he make a mistake over the date?

7b What did the Assistant Commissioner report about medical treatment and education in the workhouse? What do you think the Assistant Commissioner meant by 'industrial instruction'?

7c Why did the Assistant Commissioner attend a special meeting of the Guardians?

7d According to the Guardians, who was to blame for the regulations being broken?

7e Did the Assistant Commissioner agree with the Guardians?

Look back at sources 5 and 6

7f What evidence is there that the Board of Guardians of the Reigate Workhouse were taking their responsibilities seriously?

7g What evidence is there that the Reigate Board of Guardians were not observing all the regulations?

Source 7

This is an extract from a report by the Assistant Poor Law Commissioner on the Reigate Workhouse on 12th February 1851. (PRO ref: MH 12/12577)

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source7.htm
Poor Laws on the above Union, after a Visit on the 

February, 1851 

1. Date of last previous visit. 

22d August 1851

2. Is the Workhouse generally adequate to the Wants of the Union, in respect to its internal arrangements?

Yes in my best respects.

Yes. There is a distinct hospital and fever wards.

The receiving wards are not in want of alteration.

3. Is the provision for the sick and infectious cases sufficient? Are the receiving wards in a proper state?

Yes. There are but few children of either sex as compared with the population of the Union and much attention is given to their industrial instruction.
13. Has any marked change taken place in the state of the Workhouse, the number of the inmates, or the general condition of the Union, since your last visit?

There is generally full employment for rural labourers at this time, at good wages from 10s. to 12s. per week. But there are also standing an unusual number of single men of loose character. This has arisen in part from the abolition of the practice of keeping on the establishment throughout the previous winters of giving allowance out of the worst of work, in order to prevent any correspondence.

14. Observations not falling under any of the preceding heads.

Attended a special meeting of the Board of Guardians called to consider the report of a Committee appointed to enquire into certain charges made against the Master & Matron. The Master & Matron have been in the habit of setting aside quantities of bread alleged to have been consumed by the patients without implying the same. It is

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source7.htm
By the Rules, without opposition, to make the visits
of the Master had neglected to make the visits
to the Submissions required by the regulations of the
I had not sufficiently attended to the regular supply
of clean clothing - under your overbearing conduct
I have brought before the B.O. (for) 1st resolution, 2nd
resolution of the Master and Matron (more than)
was brought before the B.O. (for) 1st resolution, 2nd
resolution. After a full consideration, these matters it is desirable
2nd resolution of the Master and Matron (more than)
resolutions and sent to

Dated the day of

There is no

imprisonment or maintenance of undue on the part of the Master
who is in any respect unfoolish in their
reason is chiefly attributable to his neglect.

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source7.htm
Source 8

Task

8a. What recommendations did the Assistant Commissioner make?

8b. What evidence is there that he was concerned about the ways that children were being treated?

Look back at Source 7, which was written by the same man who wrote Source 8.

8c The Poor law Commissioners were sometimes accused of only being concerned with saving money. Do these sources suggest that this was the case?

Source 8

This is part of a letter written by an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner to the Poor Law Commissioners.

http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain/caring/source8.htm
London,
22 December 1855.

My Lords and Gentlemen,

I have the honour
to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 20th
instant, in which you inform me that having
had under consideration the expediency of some
further provision—than now exists for the Dietary
of young Children in Workhouses, between the ages
of two and nine years, you ask my opinion
as to the expediency of dividing that Class for the
purposes of Diet, into two; and as to what measures
may be advisable to secure to the Children
in Workhouses the kind and quality of food
suited to their respective ages.


In reply, I have no hesitation in stating my opinion that the present system by no means secures this important object; that the discretion, as regards the younger children, is very imperfectly exercised; to the great prejudice of their health and to unnecessary waste of food; and that the modification of the existing practice, proposed in the letter of the Poor Law Board, is highly desirable. I venture however to suggest that in place of leaving the preparation for Law Board

Whitehall.
preparation of the Dietary for children between 2 and 9 years of age to the Guardians conjoinly with the Workhouse Medical Officer, the latter should be required to submit such Dietary as he thinks proper to the Board of Guardians and that they should transmit the same to the Poor Law Board, with such observations as they may desire to make thereon.

I take this opportunity of adding my opinion of the desirableness (whilst establishing this additional classification) of insisting in every Workhouse on the formation of a distinct Nursery Class, under the charge of a competent Female, for the custody and care throughout the day of all
Children under 6 years of age; in a well floored room, well warmed and ventilated, where they may have their meals under the new regulation. This practice prevails in some Workhouses with the most beneficial result to the health of the Children, and to the discipline and order of the Workhouse. Mothers having children at the breast are allowed to resort to them at all times, and have them with them also in their dormitories.
Dormitories at night. The children are thus kept clean and out of harm's way during the day, and have their meals as regulated by the Medical Officer.

In the Workhouses where Nurseries are not provided (which compose by far the greater number) the children are constantly with their mothers, often young single women, who make them a pretext for evading their due share of the labours of the house; preventing due cleanliness, and especially at meal time, having thrown upon their laps, and supplying them...
with portions of their own food, unsuited to the
digestive functions of infants, whereby the
mortality amongst this class becomes often
very formidable, this mortality being increased
also in many instances by the cold brick or
stone floors of the Able women’s Day Wards.
A further evil consequence of the absence
of regular Nurseries is the practice of putting
young infant Bastards in charge of young
Girls
Girls of 15 and 16 years old, whilst the others are at work, who having continual resort to the Children are then brought into the closest and most continual communication with those from whom they ought to be the most carefully separated.

Lastly for want of these Nurseries, Children of 4 or 5 years of age are often placed in the Female School to the prejudice of the older Children, by undue diversion of the attention of the Teachers, and often to the
permanent injury of their own health by a premature exertion of their nervous systems.

I have the honour to be,

My Lords and Gentlemen

Your very obedient Servant,

Grenville Pidgeon

Place with the other answers

26th Dec"