



Salvation Army  
International Heritage Centre

*Darkest England Gazette Research Guide*

The Poor Laws



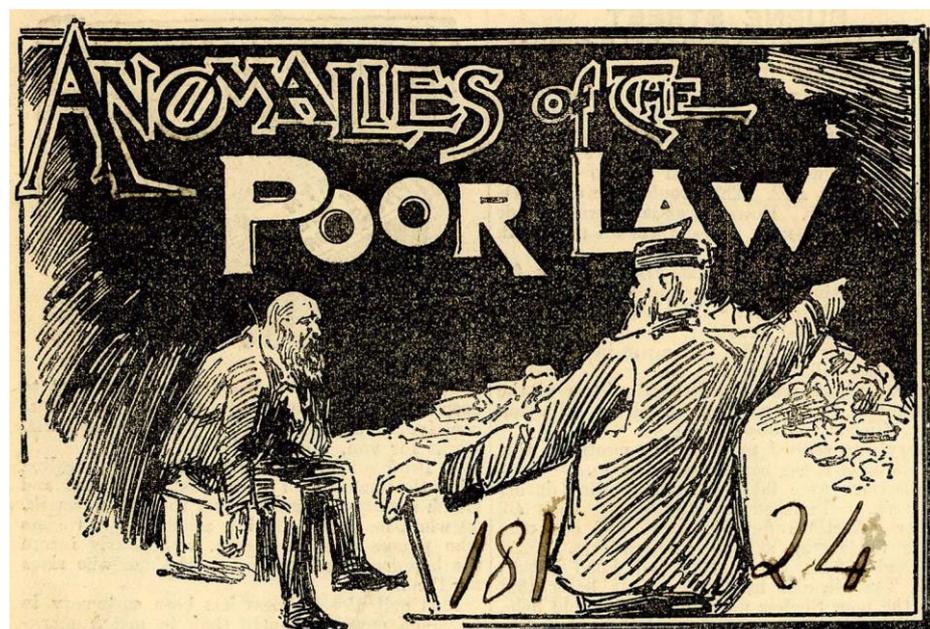
STARVATION OR WORKHOUSE ;—WHICH ?

[See next page.]

The Poor Laws referred to the legislation in England and Wales that provided a degree of social security and welfare for people in extreme poverty, from the Middle Ages up to the foundation of the modern welfare state following the Second World War. The Poor Laws determined how, when, and how much support could be offered to people in need. This included 'outdoor relief', where people were given small material contributions such as money, coal, or blankets to support them in their own homes, and workhouses, institutions where destitute people could seek shelter but which exercised rigid control over the inmates.

Where, up to the early nineteenth century, much of the administration of poor relief was left to the discretion of individual local authorities, 1834 saw the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act which aimed to make it more difficult for people in poverty to claim support, and particularly outdoor relief. People with no other options were often obliged to enter workhouses, and conditions within the workhouses were deliberately harsh to discourage people from seeking admission.

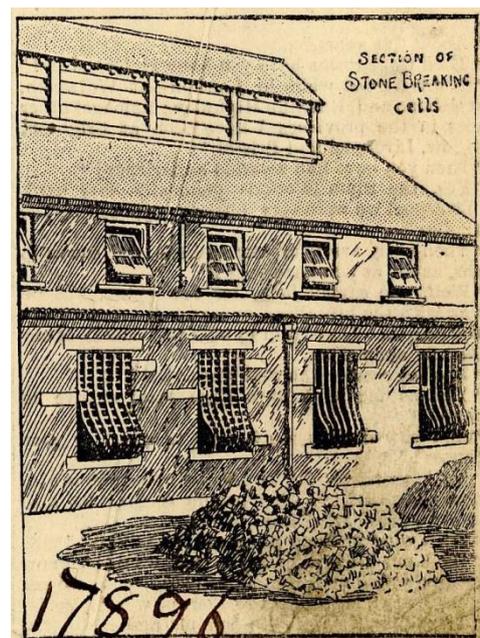
Working in deprived areas with people in extreme poverty, organisations like The Salvation Army often perceived and responded to social needs that the Poor Laws were (intentionally) not equipped to address. In many communities, furthermore, a strong stigma attached to the workhouse, and many people would go to great lengths to avoid entering an institution. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the *Gazette* was often condemnatory of the Poor Laws, workhouses, and the social conditions that left people with no choice but to apply to these bodies for help.



The *Gazette* printed regular contributions about the failings of the Poor Law system by H. R. G. Gogay, one of the Poor Law Guardians of St Saviour's Union, a local body administering poor relief in south London. Gogay's first appearance in the *Gazette* is in an article entitled 'Anomalies of the Poor Law' in **issue 21** which reports a speech in which he argued that 'pauperism and crime were not [...] to be lessened by repressive methods' such as the Poor Laws and workhouses used. Instead, he stated that '[c]ommon sense and experience taught that only by a complete system of national effort could these evils be lessened'. He advocated a better system of outdoor relief to enable destitute people to get back on their feet.

Soon Gogay himself began to contribute a regular column under the same title addressing different iniquities of the Poor Laws. His contributions begin in **issue 24** with a persuasive piece condemning the hard labour given to inmates of workhouses, but his column, which ran until **issue 40**, soon became more narrative and fictionalised, incorporating the problems he identified into stories. He also contributed a serial story entitled 'The Outcast: A Tale of the Stone-Yard', a reference to the job of stone-breaking that was often assigned to male inmates of workhouses and 'casual wards' (the overnight accommodation offered by some workhouses to people who could earn a little money during the day but who had no fixed place to sleep). The story ran from **issue 42** to **issue 47**.

While Gogay was concerned with the systematic flaws in the Poor Laws, other *Gazette* reporters investigated and exposed conditions in individual workhouses and casual wards. One such exposé was the illustrated article 'The Black Hole of Elham' in **issue 13**. Depicting the poor conditions in the casual ward of Elham, near Folkestone, it revealed the impact of individual Poor Law Guardians' indifference and neglect when their activities were not regulated and regularly inspected.



**The Salvation Army International Heritage Centre,**

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