**1834 Poor Law** v **Primary Sources** v

**In 1833 Earl Grey, the Prime Minister, set up a Poor Law Commission to examine the working of the Poor Law system in Britain. In their report published in 1834, the Commission made several recommendations to Parliament. As a result, the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed. The act stated that:**

(a) no able-bodied person was to receive money or other help from the Poor Law authorities except in a workhouse;

(b) conditions in workhouses were to be made very harsh to discourage people from wanting to receive help;

(c) workhouses were to be built in every parish or, if parishes were too small, in unions of parishes;

(d) ratepayers in each parish or union had to elect a Board of Guardians to supervise the workhouse, to collect the Poor Rate and to send reports to the Central Poor Law Commission;

(e) the three-man Central Poor Law Commission would be appointed by the government and would be responsible for supervising the Amendment Act throughout the country.

*\*\*Many at the time argued that these workhouses would become "prisons for the purpose of terrifying applicants from seeking relief.” People particularly objected to the separation of families, and to workhouse inmates being forced to wear badges or distinctive clothing.*

**Emmeline Pankhurst described her experiences as a Poor Law Guardian in her autobiography *My Own Story*.**

The leaders of the Liberal Party advised women to prove their fitness for the Parliamentary franchise by serving in municipal offices, especially the unsalaried offices. A large number of women had availed themselves of this advice, and were serving on Boards of Guardians, on school boards, and in other capacities. My children now being old enough for me to leave them with competent nurses, I was free to join these ranks. A year after my return to Manchester in 1894 I became a candidate for the Board of Poor Law Guardians. I was elected, heading the poll by a very large majority.

When I came into office I found that the law was being very harshly administered. The old board had been made up of the kind of men who are known as rate savers. They were guardians, not of the poor but of the rates! For instance, the inmates were being very poorly fed.

I found the old folks in the workhouse sitting on backless forms, or benches. They had no privacy, no possessions, not even a locker. After I took office I gave the old people comfortable Windsor chairs to sit in, and in a number of ways we managed to make their existence more endurable.

**Emmeline Pankhurst described her experiences as a Poor Law Guardian in her autobiography *My Own Story* (continued)**

The first time I went into the place I was horrified to see little girls seven and eight years on their knees scrubbing the cold stones of the long corridors. These little girls were clad, summer and winter, in thin cotton frocks, low in the neck and short sleeved. At night they wore nothing at all, night dresses being considered too good for paupers. The fact that bronchitis was epidemic among them most of the time had not suggested to the guardians any change in the fashion of their clothes.

I also found pregnant women in the workhouse, scrubbing floors, doing the hardest kind of work, almost until their babies came into the world. Many of them were unmarried women, very, very young, mere girls. These poor mothers were allowed to stay in the hospital after confinement for a short two weeks. Then they had to make a choice of staying in the workhouse and earning their living by scrubbing and other work, in which case they were separated from their babies. They could stay and be paupers, or they could leave - leave with a two-week-old baby in their arms, without hope, without home, without money, without anywhere to go. What became of those girls, and what became of their hapless infants?

**Writing Assignment:**

**After reading the above primary source document on the Poor Law and Work Houses, in a one paragraph short response, explain who the law affected as well as some of the harsh conditions and effects of the law.**