**IEU Year 7 Worksheet 1**

**‘Oliver Twist’ by Charles Dickens**

The classic story of a young boy who seeks his fortune on the streets of London. After Oliver Twist asks nasty Mr Bumble for more food, he has to flee the workhouse for the streets of London. Here he meets the Artful Dodger, who leads him to Fagin and his gang of pickpockets. When a thieving mission goes wrong, Oliver narrowly avoids prison and finds himself in the care of kind Mr Brownlow. However, Fagin and the brutal Bill Sikes go in search of the young orphan, determined to drag him back.

Oliver grows up in the workhouse, so you are going to learn some information about workhouses and life for the poor in Victorian times.

**Do now:**

1) Who used the ‘workhouse’ during the Victorian period?

2) Place the semi-colon in the correct place:

**His aunt never goes out of her house in the afternoon she’s afraid she’ll miss something exciting on her TV shows.**

3) Name a poem written by Wilfred Owen.

**Key words.**

**paupers** – poor people.

**impotent** - powerless or helpless.

**able-bodied** - fit for work or skilled.

**The Workhouse**

The word ‘workhouse' would send shudder down the spine of any honest 19th century worker; it signified the end of the line for the poor. The forbidding workhouse is one of the strongest impressions of Victorian England. Charles Dickens painted the best-known picture of it in his Oliver Twist, but even the great novelist's vivid descriptions of the repressive, soul-destroying workhouse regime.

These were almost like prisons, with bare walls, hard beds, and little food. Family members were made to separate from each other and could never meet as long as they were in the workhouse.

On entering the workhouse, you put into different categories: The "impotent poor" were those unable to look after themselves, like the very old, the very young, the sick, crippled, unmarried mothers, the blind and insane. The "able bodied poor" were those who had no work and therefore did not have any money to live on.

On arriving at the workhouse, paupers had to stripped, bathed, their hair was washed and cut short; they were issued with a workhouse uniform. Their belongings, taken away from them. No inmate could leave the workhouse except permanently. Sadly, many of those admitted died in the workhouse because of the terrible conditions. Even worse, some workhouse children who were born inside never saw the outside world.

While in the workhouse, you had to work; this was made to be hard and tedious and was an essential part of the workhouse regime. Local landowners and others who contributed to the upkeep of the inmates wanted conditions to be harsh as they resented giving money to the "undeserving poor".

Breakfast was at 5.00am, inmates began work after prayers; you could only stop for lunch, dinner, and prayers, they went to bed at eight.

The Victorians believed that religion would help the poor to overcome their "laziness, fecklessness and drunkenness". Even school lessons for children revolved around the Bible.

People ended-up in the workhouse for a variety of reasons. Usually, it was because they were too poor, old or ill to support themselves. This may have resulted from such things as a lack of work during periods of high unemployment, or someone having no family willing or able to provide care for them when they became elderly or sick. Families often disowned unmarried pregnant women and the workhouse was the only place they could go during and after the birth of their child.

The workhouse did not spend much on food, and inmates were made to eat the rotting marrow from the animal bones they were breaking to sell as fertiliser. Food was eaten by hands, as there was no cutlery, there was only water to drink.

The poor diet, contaminated water supplies, and unclean and overcrowded conditions led to illness and disease. The most common of these being measles, ophthalmic, small pox, dysentery, scarlet and typhus fever, and cholera.

Discipline was used to control inmates who were often noisy and violent. Fighting was common, especially in the women’s yard. Punishment was used regularly, even for the smallest of offences. Men were even punished for trying to talk to their wives and even children were scolded for playing.

**Answer what you have read in full sentences, using effective punctuation.**

1) Why were people divided into categories when they entered the ‘workhouse’?

2) Why do you think the workhouses were like prisons?

3) What type of illness did the workhouse inmates get? What caused these?

4) Why did the inmates each their food with their hands?

5) Why would someone end up in places like the workhouse?

**Question: Explain why life was so hard for people in the Victorian period. Try to use quotations from the passage to support your work.**

Life for the Victorians was very difficult, especially if you did not have any paid work and had to go into the workhouse. It says in the extract ‘Their belongings, taken away from them.’ In other words, if you were poor and had to go into the workhouse you could not take any personal possession with you. More specifically, the words ‘personal possessions’ show that people could not even have their own clothes and had to wear a workhouse uniform. This would take away a person’s identity and make them feel less human.

**Your turn (at least two paragraphs)…**