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**THE AUSTERITY
KITCHEN**
BY CHRISTINE
BAUMGARTHUBER

Where the alimentary is
elementary.



"And I had rather seen an house of
death, / Than those live men,
unmanned, wasted, forlorn, /
Looking toward death out of their
empty lives." —Lionel Johnson, "In
a Workhouse" (1889)

The earliest known use of the term
workhouse dates from 1631, in an
account by the mayor of Abingdon
reporting that "wee haue erected
wthn our borough a workhouse to
sett poore people to worke."

Not until the National Assistance
Act of 1948 did the last vestiges of
the Poor Law disappear, and with
them the workhouses.

A government inquiry into
conditions in the Andover
workhouse in 1845 found that
starving men and women were
supposed to be grinding, because
they wanted to suck the marrow
from them.

"I felt I was embarked in a great
cause.... My heart was in it." —
George Nicholls, Poor Law
Commissioner (c. 1834).

Previously by
CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER

*Coveye Burgers and
Plastic Malts*

Dinner with Caligula

*A Contrary Image of
Steaming Excrement*

Bleak House

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER

*Bringing the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest
number of people meant bringing greater misery to the
already wretched*



POPULAR WORKHOUSE.

The indignities suffered by Joseph Merrick, who would later
become known as the Elephant Man, were great and many,
thanks to a rare affliction that left him bent, hobbled and
covered with tumors and bony growths. Unfit for most work,
the small jobs he did find came so seldom and paid so little
that he could not support himself. His father nevertheless
drove him from the family home into the streets of Leicester,
where he wandered until he found the workhouse, the city's
sole refuge. Behind its tall gray walls he lived for five years,
his fellow residents the elderly, orphaned, destitute and
infirm.

To these other inmates Merrick seldom spoke. He passed his
days in silence, waking at dawn to the workhouse bell, rising
from a small, spare bed, one of hundreds kept in a large
dormitory, before making his way through dark corridors and
drafty stairways to a room filled with old hemp rope, rags and
animal bones. He was expected to pick apart the first two to
make oakum, fibers to add to pitch for the purpose of
caulking seams in ships' hulls. The bones he was to grind into
fertilizer. For ten or twelve hours a day Merrick and his fellow
inmates labored at these tasks. Evenings the workhouse
master would gather their product and weigh it (a quota had
always to be met) before extinguishing the gas lamps and
locking the doors. At ten the final bell rang, signaling time for
sleep.



CASUAL WARD OF WHITECHAPEL WORKHOUSE.

In 1884 Merrick escaped by joining a sideshow. Yet he never
forgot his time in the workhouse. In later years he would
speak with loathing of those dull and dreary days.



BEFORE WHITECHAPEL WORKHOUSE.

As dreary and dull as was Merrick's tenure, it was not at all
uncommon. Life in Britain's workhouses was universally
miserable, and deliberately so. The Poor Laws of 1834
prescribed unpleasantness as the best remedy for indigence.
This remedy workhouses administered to perfection. So
unpleasant were they that inmates committed crimes in hope
of being transferred to prison, where conditions were
somewhat better. Most, however, stayed put, whiling away
the hours by breaking stones or, like Merrick, picking oakum.
A stint in the workhouse was for them a fate worse than
death, and often as unavoidable.

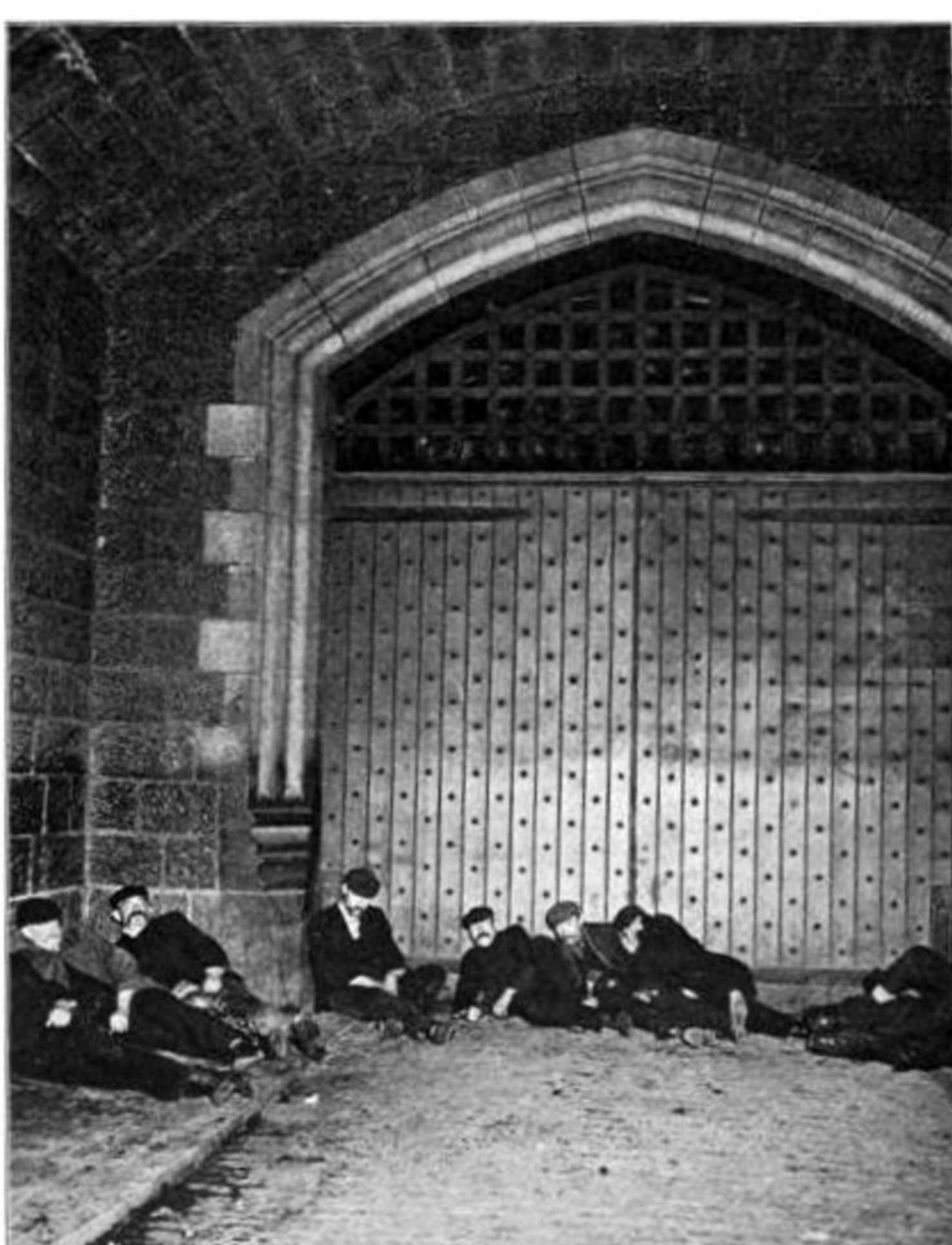
Such was the conclusion Friedrich Engels came to when in
the 1840s he visited some of Britain's most notorious
workhouses. Their inmates "were people beyond the pale of
law," he wrote, "even beyond the pale of humanity." He saw
sick men forced to work ten, twelve hours a day. He saw
children menaced, women molested. He saw beds teeming
with vermin. To this squalor was wed the most austere
discipline. Inmates could neither smoke nor receive gifts from
friends. They couldn't talk with relatives; fathers, mothers
and children were all housed in separate wings. Glimpses of
the world outside the workhouse were denied them. One
workhouse, the Herne Common, was constructed in such a
way that every window faced an inner court. "No wonder that
they would die of starvation rather than let the door of the
poor-law bastilles close behind them!", the young German
could only exclaim in the face of these cruelties.



THE MUNICIPAL DWELLINGS, NOT FAR FROM LEMAN STREET.

Even if they did let that door close behind them, workhouse
inmates went hungry more often than not. They survived
mostly on a farinaceous diet of potatoes, "very bad bread," (as
Engels himself put it) gruel, thin soup and water. These
foodstuffs workhouse administrators doled out with the
strictest economy. Each inmate received his share, no more,
no less (weights and measures on hand quashed any
accusations of skimping). The evening ration usually
consisted of a pint of soup and six ounces of bread. Into this
soup went three ounces of raw beef free from bone, two
ounces of bone, two ounces of split peas, half an ounce of
oatmeal, one ounce of vegetables, and a sprinkling of salt,
pepper and herbs.

In terms of the quantity and quality of food offered, the
workhouse menu could vary. One workhouse in Brighton was
rumored more generous, its tables bearing meat in goodly
portions twice a week. And one in London was notoriously
stingier, its boards bearing nothing but gruel and water every
day.



"UNDER THE ARCHES."

The monotonous diet only experienced a hiatus on Christmas,
when to great fanfare there appeared in place of soup and
gruel roast beef and plum pudding, which came courtesy of
workhouse patrons. Britain's elite donated each year a bit of
their wealth to the feast, over which they presided wrapped in
velvet and fur. With their own hands they served meat and
pudding to inmates, likely delighting in the many "Thank'ee
kindly mums!" which issued from the grateful paupers like so
many prayers. But even this show of generosity was carefully
measured, each serving of holiday cheer dished out in scant
ten-ounce portions.

Why such meanness? Because the commissioners who
oversaw the workhouses insisted that workers be kept
working. Relief therefore should be so unbearable that, as one
overseer put it, those seeking it would look to the workhouse
"with dread," the "reproach for being an inmate of it"
extending "downwards from father to son." Poverty
commissioners saw as a plague, and their duty was to keep it
from spreading. Should the shame and horrors of the
workhouse make the pauper take a chance with starvation, so
much the better. "If they would rather die," said Dickens's
Ebenezer Scrooge of England's poor, "they had better do it,
and decrease the surplus population."



VIEW IN WAPPING.

What wasn't really discussed was that even if father or son
found work, he often couldn't wring enough earnings from
that work to feed, clothe and shelter his family. "In some
counties," a Select Committee on Labourer's Wages found,
pay was so low that "to support a wife and child without
parish assistance" proved impossible. Many workhouse
inmates owed their poverty in part to the disappearance of
well-paying jobs. These were replaced by those that paid low
wages, provided only sporadic employment and preferred
unskilled over skilled labor. Where there's a will there's a way,
the commissioners likely reasoned. But as Joseph Merrick
and countless others found out, that way was often barred to
those who suffered the hard luck of being born poor.



April 30, 2013

Photographs from Jack London's
The People of the Abyss (1903)

Daily workhouse schedule: 6:00,
Rise. 6:30-7:00, Breakfast. 7:00-
12:00, Work. 12:00-13:00, Dinner.
13:00-18:00, Work. 18:00-19:00,
Supper. 20:00, Bedtime.

"At present, if a boy should feel a
strong impulse upon him to learn
the art of going aloft, he could only
gratify it, I presume, as the men
and women paupers gratify their
aspirations after better board and
lodging, by smashing as many
workhouse windows as possible,
and being promoted to prison." —
Charles Dickens, "A Walk in a
Workhouse" (1850)

A popular workhouse layout was
modeled after Jeremy Bentham's
prison panopticon, a radial design
with four three-story buildings at
its center set within a rectangular
courtyard, the perimeter of which
was defined by a three-story
entrance block and single-story
outbuildings, all enclosed by a wall.

The workhouse master and matron
usually received six times the
amount of food given to the
paupers.

And the guardians and their ladies,
/ Although the wind is east, / Have
come in their furs and wrappers. /
To watch their charges feast; / To
smile and be condescending, / Put
pudding on pauper plates. / To be
hosts at the workhouse banquet /
They've paid for — with the rates." —
George R. Sims, "Christmas Day
in the Workhouse" (1879)

"Receipt for a very cheap soup"
from *Essays, Political, Economical,
and Philosophical* (1802) by
Benjamin Thompson (better known
as "Count Rumford"): "Take of
water eight gallons, and mixing
with it 5 lb. of Barley-meal, boil it
to the consistency of a thick jelly. —
Season it with salt, pepper, vinegar,
sweet herbs, and four red herring,
pounded in a mortar. — Instead of
bread, add to it 5 lb. of Indian Corn
made into Sump, and stirring it
together with a ladle, serve it up
immediately in portions of 20
ounces."

ESSAYS