

The National Archives  
Education Service

**Britain 1906-1918**

**Background and Big  
Question- Gallery One**



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## Gallery Background

### Introduction: The problem of poverty

Like most societies, Britain has always had its most vulnerable people - the poor. However, attitudes towards the most vulnerable people in society have not always been the same. In Tudor times, for example, poor people caught begging could be whipped and chased out of the town or village where they tried to beg. In the 19th century, the poor who could not look after themselves had to go to the workhouse. The harsh conditions, but above all the shame of the workhouse, meant that some people starved rather than enter it.

By the early 1900s attitudes were beginning to change. When the Liberal government came to power in 1906 Liberal MPs were convinced that there had to be government action to help the poor, the old and people who were unemployed. What convinced them?

### The scale of the problem

Social reformers like Charles Booth (in London) and Seebohm Rowntree (in York) carried out detailed studies into the lives of the poor. Their results were truly shocking. Their studies showed just how many people lived on the poverty line - in York it was over a quarter of the population. The studies also showed just how bad life was for the very poor - terrible housing, poor health, bad diet and an endless struggle just to feed the family.

#### [Background source 1](#)

A plan drawn in 1900 showing packed and unsanitary working class housing in the Boundary Street area of Bethnal Green (PRO ref: PRO 30/69/1824)

#### [Background source 2](#)

A table showing the weekly diet of a working family in Liverpool. It comes from 'How the Casual Labourer Lives', a study looking at life for the poor in Liverpool in 1909.  
(By permission of the British Library: AC2472)

Other studies made people and politicians aware that the most vulnerable in society were also often the worst off. When people were too old to work, they had to rely on their family or charity to feed and house them. Children living in the poorest areas were vulnerable to disease, especially in their early years. They were also vulnerable to exploitation. Employers used child labour because children were cheap. Sometimes even parents forced their children to work because they needed the earnings. There were other abuses which children suffered as well, including malnourishment and even violent abuse. It is not surprising that in the poor districts the attendance of the children was very high. For many of these children school was a warm, safe place compared to home and work.

### The reasons for the problems

The main reason why poor children and the old suffered so much was poverty, but why was there so much poverty?

Old people who were poor were poor because they could no longer work and earn money. During their working lives they had not earned enough to put money aside to keep them in their old age. Children were poor because their parents were poor.

Until the early 1900s most people thought that the poor were poor because they wasted their money on drink. However, social reformers showed that poverty was caused by a number of key factors:

- Unemployment or partial unemployment (the inability to get a job which was permanent)
- The death of a wage earner in the family
- Illness
- Low wages
- Large families

There were also reasons behind the reasons. In the 19th century Britain had been the world's leading industrial nation. By the early 1900s other countries like Germany and the USA were competing strongly with Britain. This took jobs away from Britain and left people in poverty.

As people realised that poverty was not really the fault of the poor they began to support the view that the government should do something to help the young, the old and the unemployed.

Was anything done to help the poor before the Liberal reforms?

A lot was done before the Liberal reforms began in 1906. The Conservative party passed a number of acts like the Unemployed Workmen's Act in 1903, and the Employment of Children Act 1903. Local councils passed byelaws on issues like child labour. They also cleared slum housing and built new housing for the poor.

### **Why did the Liberals take action in 1906?**

But why did the government take action in 1906 as opposed to any other date? One reason was that the Liberals were faced with so much evidence of such terrible poverty, hardship and ill health. Other factors also played their part.

In 1906 there were young and ambitious politicians who became part of the government. Two of the most important were David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. Both of these men felt that the state of Britain's poor was a national disgrace.

There were also political reasons for introducing welfare reforms. The Liberals were concerned about the growing popularity of the new Labour Party. They thought that welfare reforms might attract voters to their party instead of Labour. Another factor was national security. In 1899 Britain went to war in South Africa. When the army called for volunteers to join up it was found that around 50% of those who applied were unfit to join the army.

The problem was that a lot of the action depended on the attitude of the local authorities. Some councils did take action. Others did not, usually because of the cost of measures like building new housing.

#### [Background source 3](#)

A plan drawn in 1900 showing working class housing in the Boundary Street area of Bethnal Green after it had been cleared and rebuilt by the London County Council  
(PRO ref: PRO 30/69/1824)

#### [Background source 4](#)

Extract from a document produced by the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain commenting on the state of health of people in Britain (PRO ref: PC 8/612)



# Sources

## Background Source 1

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## Background Source 2

A table showing the weekly diet of a working family in Liverpool. It comes from 'How the Casual Labourer Lives', a study looking at life for the poor in Liverpool in 1909.

(By permission of the British Library: AC2472)

Menu of Meals in week 4.				
	BREAKFAST	DINNER	TEA	SUPPER
Sunday .....	Tea .....	Rabbit .....	Bread .....	—
	Bread .....	Potatoes .....	Margarine .....	—
	Margarine .....	Vegetables .....	Tea .....	—
	Fish .....	Rice Pudding ..	Marmalade .....	—
	10	10	10	
Monday .....	Tea .....	Rabbit .....	Tea .....	—
	Bread .....	Potatoes .....	Bread .....	—
	Margarine .....	—	Margarine .....	—
	Kippers .....	—	Kippers .....	—
	10	8	10	
Tuesday .....	Tea .....	Pea Soup .....	Tea .....	—
	Bread .....	Bread .....	Bread .....	—
	Margarine .....	Rice Pudding ..	Bacon .....	—
	Kippers .....	—	—	—
	10	10	10	
Wednesday .....	Tea .....	Stew .....	Tea .....	Porridge
	Bread .....	Potatoes .....	Bread .....	Milk
	Margarine .....	Bread Pudding	Margarine .....	—
	Bacon .....	—	Marmalade .....	—
	10	10	10	2
Thursday .....	Tea .....	Potatoes .....	Tea .....	—
	Bread .....	Turnips .....	Bread .....	—
	Marmalade .....	—	Herrings .....	—
	10	8	10	—
Friday .....	Tea .....	Potatoes .....	Tea .....	Bread
	Bread .....	Turnips .....	Bread .....	Milk
	Margarine .....	—	Margarine .....	—
	Herrings .....	—	—	—
	10	8	9	1
Saturday .....	Tea .....	Potatoes .....	Tea .....	—
	Bread .....	—	Bread .....	—
	Margarine .....	—	Sausages .....	—
	Bacon .....	—	—	—
	10	7	8	

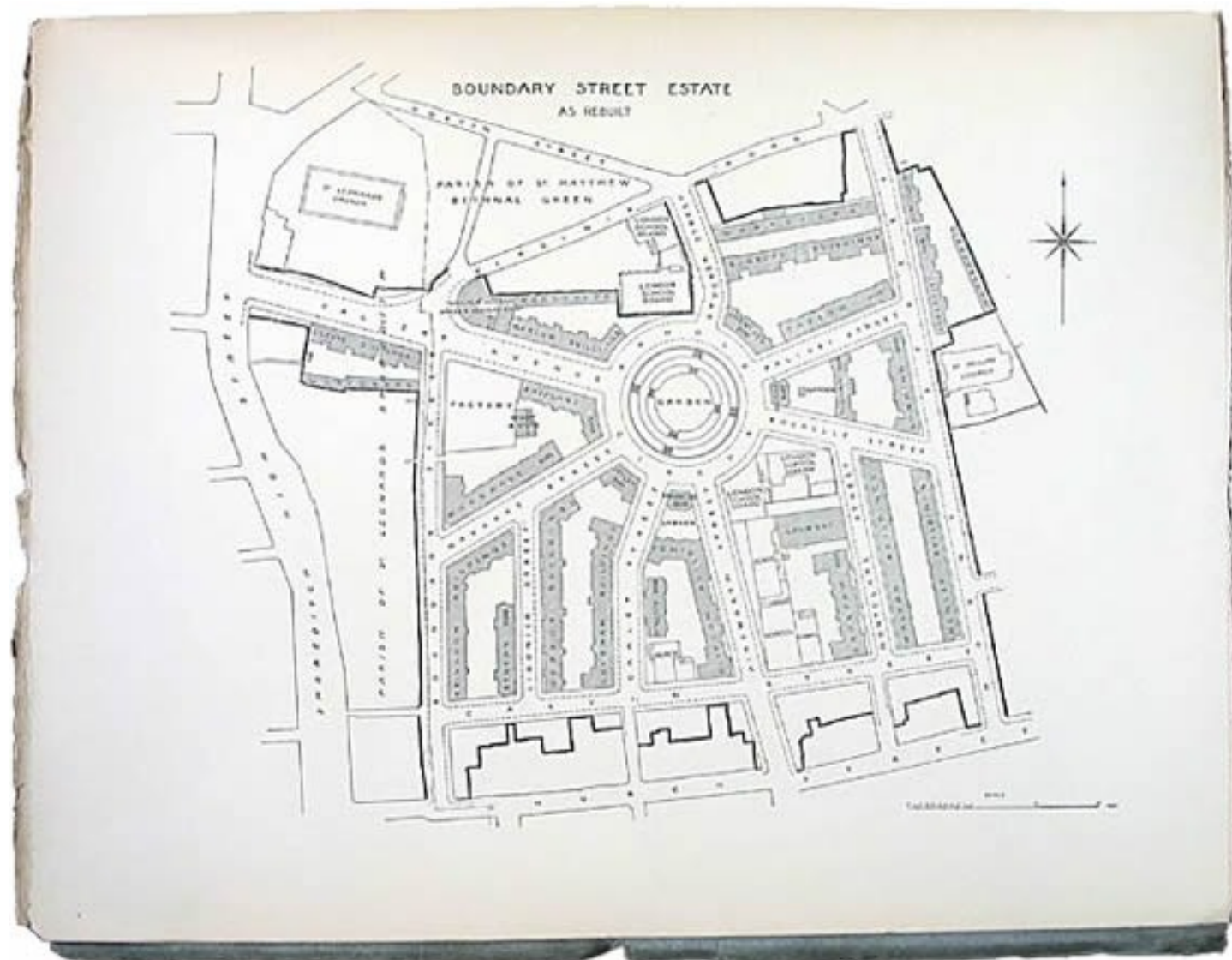
## Transcript

## Menu of meals in week 4

	Breakfast	Dinner	Tea	Supper
<b>Sunday</b>	Tea	Rabbit	Bread	
	Bread	Potatoes	Margarine	
	Margarine	Vegetables	Tea	
	Fish	Rice Pudding	Marmalade	
	10	10	10	
<b>Monday</b>	Tea	Rabbit	Tea	
	Bread	Potatoes	Bread	
	Margarine		Kippers	
	10	8	10	
<b>Tuesday</b>	Tea	Pea Soup	Tea	
	Bread	Bread	Bread	
	Margarine	Rice Pudding	Bacon	
	Kippers			
	10	10	10	
<b>Wednesday</b>	Tea	Stew	Tea	Porridge
	Bread	Potatoes	Bread	Milk
	Margarine	Bread Pudding	Margarine	
	Bacon		Marmalade	
	10	10	10	2
<b>Thursday</b>	Tea	Potatoes	Tea	
	Bread	Turnips	Bread	
	Marmalade		Herrings	
	20	8	10	
<b>Friday</b>	Tea	Potatoes	Tea	Bread
	Bread	Turnips	Bread	Milk
	Margarine		Margarine	
	Herrings			
	10	8	9	1
<b>Saturday</b>	Tea	Potatoes	Tea	
	Bread		Bread	
	Margarine		Sausages	
	Bacon			
	10	7	8	

### Background Source 3

A plan drawn in 1900 showing working class housing in the Boundary Street area of Bethnal Green after it had been cleared and rebuilt by the London County Council  
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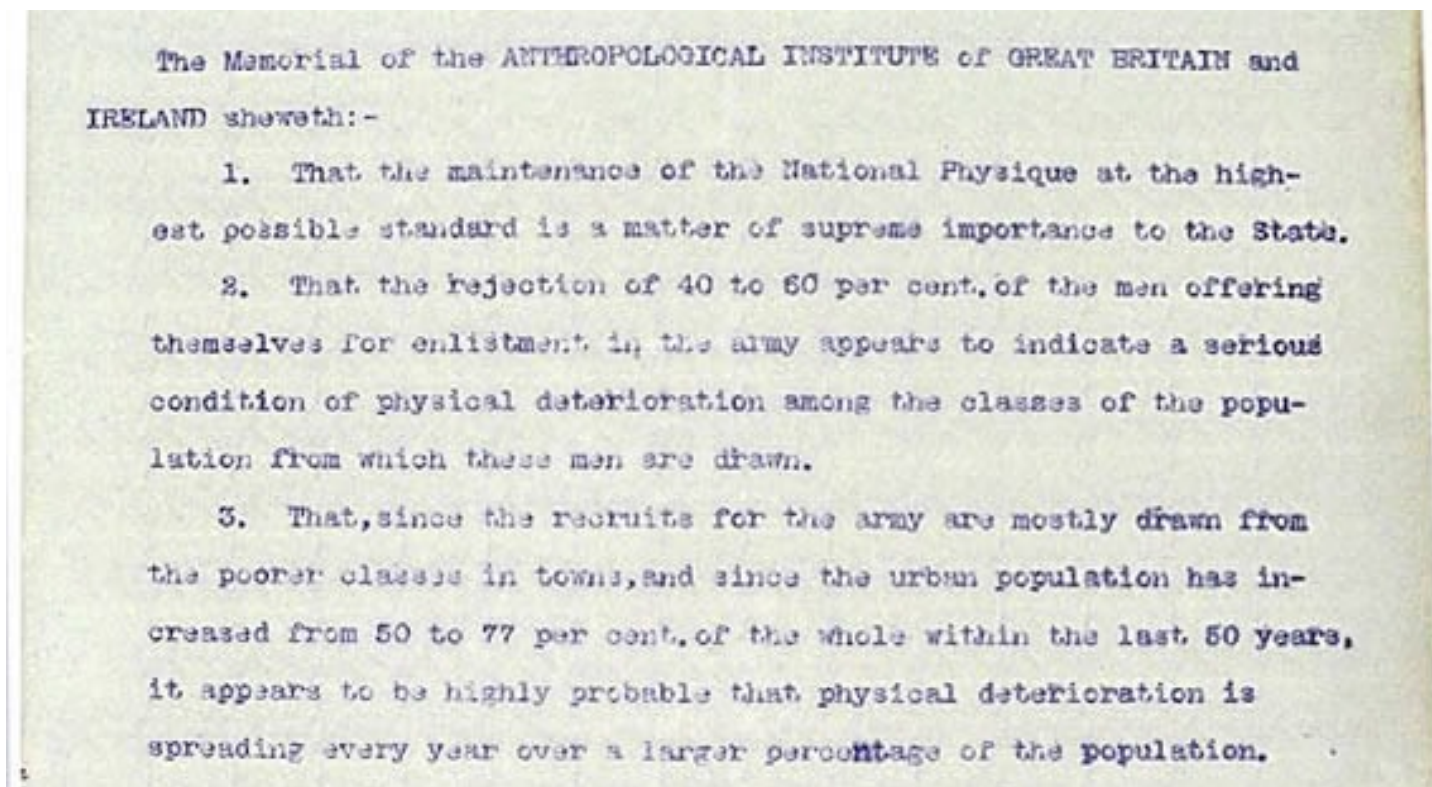




## Background Source 4

Extract from a document produced by the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain commenting on the state of health of people in Britain

(PRO ref: PC 8/612)



## Transcript

The Memorial of the ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSTITUTE OF GREAT BRITAIN and IRELAND sheweth:-

1. That the maintenance of the National Physique at the highest possible standard is a matter of supreme importance to the State.
2. That the rejection of 40 to 60 per cent. of the men offering themselves for enlistment in the army appears to indicate a serious condition of physical deterioration among the classes of the population from which these men are drawn.
3. That, since the recruits for the army are mostly drawn from the poorer classes in towns, and since the urban population has increased from 50 to 77 per cent. of the whole within the last 50 years, it appears to be highly probable that physical deterioration is spreading every year over a larger percentage of the population.

## Gallery one: The Big Question

THE BIG QUESTION IN THIS GALLERY IS:

### WHAT LAY BEHIND THE LIBERAL WELFARE REFORMS 1906-11?

**To tackle this question you must work in three stages:**

**Stage 1** involves researching one or more of the case studies (your teacher will tell you how many case studies to research).

**Stage 2** involves you prioritising.

**Stage 3** involves you reaching a conclusion on the Big Question and writing it up. This conclusion should be based on evidence. This means using your own knowledge and what you have found out from the sources as evidence to support the views you put forward.

#### **Stage 1**

##### **Possible reasons why the Liberals introduced welfare reforms**

For each case study we have drawn up a list of possible reasons that may (or may not) explain why the Liberals introduced welfare reforms in the early 1900s. You must decide whether each of these reasons is supported or contradicted by the sources in the case studies. Below is a research table with a list of reasons for each case study. You can use the research table to make notes evaluating each reason. (There's an example of how you might do this in the table for Young People.)

#### **Stage 2**

##### **Which points matter?**

After studying each case study, you should have a pretty good idea of why the Liberals decided to bring in reforms for young people, old people and working people. Look back at your work on each case study and choose what you think are the 3 main reasons why they brought in reforms in each area.

#### **Stage 3**

##### **Writing it up**

You can now use all your work to write up an answer to the Big Question in this gallery:

What lay behind the Liberal welfare reforms, 1906-11? You might follow the format in the related word document.