

Chapter 1 Introduction

This study will explore the health and diet of the English pauper and the workhouse inmate through a comparative assessment of osteological and historical data associated with five Post-Medieval cemeteries across London, as well as published workhouse diets and discharge records. Combining historical and archaeological sources allows for a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of 19th century social reform. As part of wider political and social pressure, the introduction of the New Poor Law in 1834 centralised the existing Parochial care of the poor, into standardised Government Unions and abolished outdoor relief, in favour of a Union Workhouse. Instead of being a safety net, the workhouse became a place to ‘deter the idle, punish the immoral, reform the redeemable, and treat the physically unable’ (Newman 2013, 124). To achieve this, workhouses introduced a standardised regime that included hard labour and restricted diets that were meant to deter institutionalisation. This project aims to examine the effects of these political reforms on the health and well-being of London’s poor, through the analysis of diet, demography and skeletal evidence for pathology.

1.1 HISTORICAL SOURCES AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Utilising historical documentation in conjunction with archaeological evidence allows researchers to augment, confirm or correct the accepted documentary record (Connah 2009, 82). This study focuses on London’s poorest citizens, the pauper and workhouse inmate. There have been previous attempts by historical archaeologists to place class distinctions upon archaeological populations (Wurst 1999, 7). Spencer-Wood and Herberling (1987, 59) described status as a ‘defined social position located in a defined social universe’. They argue that whilst the two terms are not completely synonymous, status and class are indeed tightly linked. Class, ultimately, is an objective category within populations that is based on attributes of the individual (Wurst 1999, 8).

Leone and Crosby (1987, 399) suggest that historical archaeologists should utilise the two sources of data- the archaeological and the documentary - to highlight key differences in the records. By acknowledging the potential biases

(see Chapter Three and Seven) within historical and archaeological records and combining sources of workhouse administration and osteological records, which allows for a more detailed understanding of the welfare of London’s Poor.

1.2 RESEARCH IN SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Table 1-1: Source of inequality, (Feinstein, 1993:305).

	Life Span	Access to health care
Materialistic	Housing, overcrowding, sanitation, transit mode, occupational hazards, environmental hazards	Ability to purchase health care, ability to purchase pharmaceuticals, regular physician
Behavioural	Diet, exercise, leisure activities, risk taking, alcohol and substance abuse	Comprehensive medical information, 'playing the system', following instructions, self-diagnosis, awareness of recurrence

Research has shown that social inequality can influence the health of an individual (Braveman et al, 2005, 2879; DeWitte et al 2015, 241; Hughes-Morey 2016, 127). Despite the fall in mortality rates and increased life expectancy during the 20th century, those of lower economic status still face lower life expectancy when compared to higher status individuals (Braveman et al. 2005, 2883; Connah 2009, 84; Feinstein 1993, 279; Sapir-Hen and Ben-Yosef 2014, 780; Stranska et al. 2015, 65). In attempting to explain the source of social inequalities (Table 1-1), Feinstein (1993, 280) has identified a correlation between resource-dependency (materials) and behavioural influences (i.e. psychological, genetic, and cultural factors).

Unequal access to health care services, differences in diet, exercise and occupation can lead to social inequalities that can in turn affect the health of an individual (Braveman et al. 2005, 2880; Feinstein 1993, 300; Lewis 2002, 215; Linhares et al. 1984, 627; Mays et al. 2009b, 411; Stranska et al. 2015, 70).

These definitions are however, often influenced by the criteria of study (i.e. poor/rich, uneducated/educated, etc.), as well as its political and social context. European based research on socioeconomics, often uses an individual's occupation to measure social status in contrast to the United States where status is defined by household income and education (Braveman et al. 2005, 2879). Archaeologists, who are often forced to employ an *etic* approach in reconstructing past societies, often draw upon such approaches to understand socioeconomic status (Arnold 1971, 21; Asante et al. 2013, 5; Hughes 2015, 25).

Indeed, archaeological research examining historic societies often focuses on the material culture to determine individual status (Connah 2009, 85; Larrea and Freire 2002, 360; Sapir-Hen and Ben-Yosef 2014, 780). Lower status dwellings are thought to be smaller and constructed using poorer quality materials and would therefore have been less comfortable and more crowded (Connah 2009, 86). Archaeological artefacts and faunal assemblages have also been utilised, sometimes in conjunction with dwellings, by historical archaeologists to determine socioeconomic status (*ibid.*).

However, an *emic* approach can be taken when studying a well-documented historical society, such as that of 19th century London. This additional context can be used to reinforce interpretations of the archaeological record. In Victorian London (1837-1901), socioeconomic status was determined by an individual's birth, education, employment and personal wealth (Connah 2009, 82). However, as with modern studies, classifications of societal differences can be blurred; for example some wealthy members of society might be viewed as socially inferior due to how they had accumulated wealth (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, from historical accounts, the lowest on the socioeconomic ladder were the urban poor who inhabited overcrowded and unsanitary areas within polluted cities. These individuals would have also been the most frequent users of the workhouse during the industrial revolution.

1.3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON WORKHOUSES – HISTORICAL

Previous historical research into the workhouse, and the poor laws, has focused on social and legal reforms, economy, and medical care (Boulton et al. 2013; Forsythe et al. 1996; Hilton 2006; Horrell & Oxley 2013; Miller 2012a, 2013, 2014; Smith et al. 2008; Tomkins 2013). Studies have also discussed the impact of the New Poor Laws on life within the workhouse (Englander 1998, 50; Goose 2006, 365; Stewart and King 2004, 75). Johnston's (1985) study of institutionalised diets from 1834-1895, contrasted prison and workhouse menus, concluding that prisons actually provided a healthier diet for inmates. Changes in diet, and the resulting impact on health, have also been studied in Irish workhouses, where following the potato famine, Indian corn meal was added to the menus to the detriment of the Irish workhouse inmate as they would either actively avoiding consuming the corn meal or did not correctly know how to prepare the meal for consumption (Miller 2014, 5; Miller 2013, 941; Miller 2012, 445; O'Connor 1995, 116).

A number of detailed databases are also available for the study of workhouse populations and the lives of the poor. Research by Higginbotham (2013a), has provided a detailed corpus of all workhouses across the United Kingdom, alongside references to available parish records and online historical databases. One of these references, London Lives directed by Hitchcock and Shoemaker (Hitchcock et al. 2012), includes links to digitised parliamentary papers, registers, and manuscripts from 1690 until 1800. As a result of the wide availability of the material, many studies on workhouses have been conducted as part of ancestry research by the general public and those interested in local history.

1.4 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON WORKHOUSES – ARCHAEOLOGICAL

Archaeological research on workhouses have primarily focused on the architecture of the buildings, examining how the inmates would have perceived and ultimately experienced the workhouse (Beisaw & Gibb 2009; Casella 2007; Newman 2013; Piddock 2007). Parallels have been drawn between the similarities of workhouse buildings and contemporary prisons, suggesting that the poor were often seen as criminals (Morrison 1999, 193). Morrison (1999), based on the work of Markus (1993), has established a chronological typology of English workhouses, linking the architectural experience to expressions of power and control that was central to the New

Poor Law workhouses (described in Historical background) (Markus 1993, 141).

Similar interpretations of workhouses as metaphors of social control have been revealed through landscape studies of site location (Newman 2014, 124). The marginal location of workhouses in Northern England, placed inmates both literally as well as metaphorically on the edge of society (*ibid.*). However, institutions in densely populated areas, such as London, were intentionally located in visible areas of the landscape to act as a constant reminder of the ‘consequences of pauperism’, enhancing the social stigma surrounding the use of the workhouse especially under the New Poor Law (*ibid.*). Urban workhouses would have been part of the cityscape, and the plain and domineering architectural features would have acted as a deliberate deterrent (Driver 1993, 40).

1.5 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF POST-MEDIEVAL ENGLAND



Figure 1-1: A Victorian slum. ‘Dudley Street, Seven Dials’, engraving by Gustave Doré, 1872.

The Post-Medieval period (spanning the mid-16th century to the end of the 19th century) is characterised by the rural to urban migration that fuelled the increasing urbanisation during this time (Buer 2006, 22; Houlbrooke 1998, 30; Mathias 1993, 167; McCord 1979, 10; Singleton 1970, 43). From this, and following the Reformation, new social and religious ideals were introduced—including the belief of corporeal resurrection after death (Houlbrooke 1998, 43; Richardson 1987, 276). In order for corporeal resurrection to occur, the body could not be disturbed or damaged following burial. This became a primary practical concern for those living in crowded urban centres where burial space was at a premium and the sanctity of the dead body was at risk of defilement from resurrection men (Tarlow 2010, 94). The sanctity of the final resting place was a significant issue surrounding death in the workhouse and

subsequent burial by the parish (See Chapter Five: Discussion).

1.5.1 Living Standards

The lack of proper sanitation in the overcrowded cities during the Industrial Revolution led to a heightened transmission of typhus, louse-borne diseases, intestinal disease, and other diseases ranging from minor infection to deadly epidemics (McCord 1979, 30). The epidemics of the Industrial Revolution were typically associated with warmer climates (i.e. typhoid, plague, and cholera), transmission of these diseases would have been facilitated by city ports and improved communication networks (*ibid.*).

The cramped conditions (Figure 1-1) and poor nutrition, engendered by food shortages, exacerbated the spread of tuberculosis and resulted in high mortality rates (Roberts and Buikstra 2003, 50). Such diseases were a common affliction of poorer individuals in society, who resided mainly in overcrowded areas. These slums were notorious for their ‘filth and squalor’ (Porter 1998, 76) and, combined with the pollution from factories would have had a negative impact on health. The restriction of sunlight would have also increased the risk of vitamin deficiency (Roberts and Cox 2003, 299).

Living conditions were also impacted by the harsh manual labour that was typically undertaken by the urban poor. Within London, a significant proportion of the working class were employed in factories, mostly in the textile industry (Hamlin 1995, 857; Porter 1998, 90). All members of a working class family were expected to have been employed in what was often long and dangerous work, for low wages (Hilton 2006, 55; Mathias 1993, 344).

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) **A decline in health within the lowest class of Londoners during the mid-19th century should be observable due to the change in welfare strategies after the passing of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment.**
 - a. **How did the quality and composition of workhouse diets before and after the 1834 amendment change?**
 - b. **Is there a correlated increase in pathological conditions observable on the skeleton associated with poor diet and poor living conditions amongst those buried in cemeteries associated with workhouses and/or the poor?**

- 2) **Historical studies have stated that union workhouse populations are more likely to have a higher proportion of female inmates** (Boulton & Schwarz, 2010; Hollen Lees, 1998; Mackay, 1995).
 - a. **Is there a change in the demography of the skeletal collections of the 19th century (St Bride's and Cross Bones) compared to the earlier collections (St Thomas and Broadgate)?**
 - i. **Is there an increase in the prevalence of elderly individuals in the 19th century cemeteries compared to the earlier collections?**
 - ii. **Is there an increase in the prevalence of elderly males in the 19th century cemeteries due to 'domestic value'?**
 - b. **Do the historical and archaeological records present similar demographics?**
- 3) **Utilising the Shoreditch Union Workhouse register of admissions and discharges, is it possible to determine cyclical use of the workhouse?**
 - a. **Was it more likely for workhouse inmates to pass away whilst an inmate in the workhouse after an extended period of residence in the workhouse?**

1.7 STUDY LAYOUT

Chapter Two will provide a historical background of the workhouse and the English poor laws. It will outline important early statutes, from the end of feudalism and the creation of the working class to the earliest government provisioning of relief. The creation of the New Poor Laws will then be discussed alongside changes to health care provided by workhouses and will explore gendered differences of the workhouse inmate and the independent poor. The introduction of the New Poor Laws will also be contextualised within wider changing perceptions of the poor during the Victorian period.

Chapter Three will outline the materials and methods that were utilised within this study. This includes a historical discussion of the five study cemeteries, as well as an outline of the pathological conditions thought to be associated with lower socioeconomic populations. Methods of the desk-based study will be discussed in reference to workhouse dietaries, osteological collections and the historical sources consulted. Limitations and biases will also be introduced.

Chapter Four will outline the results of the study, including the dietary composition of the workhouse

menus which are compared to the caloric expenditure of work activities in the workhouse. Osteological analysis will focus on the conditions discussed in Chapter 3 and compared to the historical sources of workhouse admission and cemetery burial records.

Chapter 5 contextualises the results outlined in the previous chapter within the wider historical framework of Post-Medieval London (see Chapter 2). Analysis will be related to the research questions discussed in Chapter 1, by comparing the results of the caloric and osteological studies to the historical study of workhouse demographics.

Chapter Six will summarise and conclude the study, indicating future avenues for research as well as the limitations of the study.