

The Battle for the Old Age Pension

The Old Age Pensions Act was passed in 1908. Before that, those who could no longer earn a living due to old age depended solely upon charity to survive. It took ten years of campaigning by liberal reformers, Christian Socialists and above all Trade Unionists to win elderly people the right to an income that would save them the horror of dying in the workhouse.

It was Elizabeth 1st who issued a law in 1601 that parishes would be responsible for providing food and housing for its poor. Not surprisingly, this was unpopular with the wealthier parish residents, as parishes introduced the raising of 'poor rates'. By 1622, a new act had been introduced, allowing churchwardens faced with newly arrived residents, (who looked like they may soon become dependent) to send them back to reside in their last abode. These new arrivals would walk miles each day to their original parish, or suffer some punishment.

The original Poor Laws were to cut the costs of sustaining the poor, and only those deemed to be deserving, lead moral and thrifty lives were to benefit.

To reduce costs even more, Poor Houses (usually small) for elderly or infirm people were set up around Britain by parish unions.

These were the forerunners of the workhouses.

Workhouses

With the 1834 POOR LAW AMENDMENT ACT people receiving help from the parish had to live in a workhouse & could no longer live at home. In return for parish relief, they would be made to work hard in the workhouse; which is how the term originated. The Act also allowed parishes to club together into unions responsible for building workhouses & for running them. In the next few years hundreds of workhouses were built.

The first of these were opened as havens for the poor where shelter, food and dignity could be found. This was not to last long. Modelled on the prison system, discipline was harsh and breaking the rules (uncleanliness, swearing or talking out of turn) could lead to longer working hours, less food and solitary confinement. People wore uniforms, were separated by gender or age and were allowed no privacy.



England had a population of just over 29 million by 1891. Of those, 1.3 million were paupers. Almost a third of those were over the age of 60. Britain was one of the wealthiest nations in the world, yet millions of

Queen Victoria's subjects lived in poverty, especially older people. Apart from a few officials or members of the armed forces, it was rare for anyone to have a pension. Well-off Victorians believed that people were poor because they were lazy and help should only be given to the 'deserving' poor. By the end of the century so many

people were poor and destitute that it was impossible to ignore the problem any longer.

Charles Booth

Charles Booth was born in Liverpool in 1840 and became a successful businessman. Bored with his business he undertook studies of the poor, showing need for reform.



He argued that older people deserved physical comfort and independence. In his book *Pauperism and the Endowment of Old Age*, Booth wrote that workhouses did nothing to lessen the poverty and suffering of the elderly. He stated that 'women have often spent lives of the most active and invaluable citizenship, without ever having the smallest opportunity for saving'. He enlisted the help of 'researchers', one of them being his cousin, Beatrice Potter.

Booth proposed that the government should introduce a pension of 5 shillings a week for everyone over the age of 65.

The idea was catching on, but many early schemes were little more than disguised charity for 'deserving' poor people. Several Trade Unions initiated schemes, and by 1905, 39 Trade Unions had established contributory superannuation schemes, covering 15,604 paying members. The Trade Unions started campaigning for old-age pensions in the 1890s, and won their first victory with a very meagre means-tested pension introduced in 1908 by a Liberal government.

In 1895 The Royal Commission on the Aged Poor (chair, Lord Aberdare) inquired whether any alterations in the system of Poor Law Relief were desirable. The commission did not recommend any major changes, although the subject should be examined further. It did suggest that conditions in workhouses should be improved, but that pensions should be left to the Friendly Societies. The Commissioners considered that "pauperism is becoming a constantly diminishing evil, ultimately to disappear before the continuous progress of thrift and social well-being".

By 1896 a Treasury Committee (chair, Lord Rothschild) was established to consider any 'contributory schemes that may be submitted to them for encouraging the industrial population, by state aid or otherwise, to make provision for old age, and to recommend any schemes, their cost, and how they may affect the Exchequer and local rates, their effect in promoting habits of thrift and self-reliance on the population, the influence on their prosperity and their possible cooperation'.

The Treasury Committee's concern was to keep the cost to the taxpayer as low as possible. Both the Aberdare and the Rothschild Committees other concern was that if the 'undeserving poor' were receiving help, people would be disinclined to plan and save for their own support.

The demand for an old age pension was growing and in 1898, Francis Stead, a social worker and church minister from Tyneside, realising that charity alone was not sufficient to cater for many people's needs. He organised a meeting in London; this initiated a nationwide campaign for old age pensions.

William Pembert Reeves, a friend of Francis and the London Agent of New Zealand, informed him of their government's non-contributory pension of seven shillings a week for all aged 65 and Francis invited him to speak about it at Browning Hall in Southwark, London. Many trade unionists attended this meeting, and an historic meeting on 13th December 1898, at which Charles Booth was the main speaker. Attendees at the meeting included George Barnes (later to become



Pensions Minister), Will Crookes and Frederick Maddison (later to become MP's). The following year, further conferences in support of pensions took place around the UK, where hundreds of thousands of trade unionists, labour organisations and friendly societies were represented. At a meeting in Birmingham in March 1899, other organisations, such as The Manchester Odd Fellows and The Ancient Order of Foresters attended.

Many people and organisations were becoming involved, stirred no doubt by the conviction of Charles Booth. After these general meetings around the country, The National Committee of Organised Labour for Promoting Old Age Pensions for All was formed in 1899, with delegates representing 27 trade unions and 2 trade councils. On 9 May 1899, the National Pensions Committee called a national campaign for universal non-contributory old age pensions at 65. Over the next decade the campaign managed to secure hundreds of thousands of signatures for its petitions, and persuaded the Parliament to hold various inquiries into the viability of introducing a pension. Finally, on 1 August 1908 the Old Age Pensions Act became law.

The Old Age Pensions Act marked the state's first step in providing for old age. It was a mean's tested, non -contributory state pension of 5 shillings a week for men and women aged 70 and over and was an advance of social policy that would eventually lay the foundations for the creation of the National Insurance system and the welfare state.