Making of Modern Britain

Poverty and the Poor Laws

1597 and 1601- Elizabethan Poor laws

➢ National system of poor relief in England and Wales

➢ Administered by parishes (villages) 15,000 parishes. Figure of the parish administered poor laws

1. The impotent poor (sick, disabled, lunatic) needed institutional care

2. The able-bodied poor – not in work

3. The children of the poor: send to apprenticeships

The poor laws in England were the first in Europe

1662- Act of settlement

❑ Each person given legal parish of settlement. Someone couldn’t move to apply for poor relief in a different parish – method of control/surveillance

1722- Workhouse act / Knatchbull act

❑ Power to build special houses to ‘keep, maintain and employ such poor in their respective parishes…’

❑ By 1776, $1,912 workhouses established

1782- Poor relief act / Gilberts act

❑ Amalgamations of parishes into ‘unions’ possible, with a shared workhouse

❑ These workhouses were exclusively for children

❑ Indoor relief-inside workhouse, given to impotent poor

❑ Outdoor relief-outside workhouse, given to able-bodied poor

Characteristics of the Old Poor Law

❑ It was a decentralised and local system - each parish had control and there were 15,000 parishes in England and Wales

❑ Regional diversity in practices of poor relief

❑ Different types of relief: weekly cash, pensions (weekly cash sum), clothes bought, medical bills paid etc