

In 1883, when church minister Andrew Mearns wrote a report on the lives of the poor in London, people were shocked by what he reported –

“Every room in these rotten and reeking tenements houses a family, often two... To get into them you have to penetrate courts reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage... ascend rotten staircases... grope your way along dark and filthy passages swarming with vermin.”

Conditions were the same in Scottish cities. While Empire and industrialisation had brought great wealth to Britain, few enjoyed the benefits. In the growing industrial cities, the poor, even those in work – had to struggle just to survive.

The Poor Law Amendment act of 1834 provided some basic welfare. It meant that destitute people – those unable to afford even food or shelter – could apply to live in large buildings called workhouses – similar poorhouses were set up in 1845 Scotland.

When families were admitted, they were separated and children were rarely allowed to see their parents.

Middle and upper class people had little sympathy for the plight of the poor.

*‘Self Help’* was a popular book published in 1859. Its author explained that anybody could get themselves out of poverty, just by saving a small amount of their earnings every week.

When people didn’t help themselves, the book said, it was because they were lazy or drunk.

With little help from the state, in many parts of the country, workers set up Friendly Societies such as the Oddfellows in Edinburgh. They allowed those with regular work to pay small contributions every week, and receive benefit payments if they became too ill or too old to work.

But many lived on such low wages they couldn’t afford to pay into these schemes.

Not everyone turned a blind eye to poverty...

Many charitable organisations were set up, such as Barnardo's, The Salvation Army, or the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

In-depth studies of the lives of the poor were carried out – by Charles Booth in London, and Seebohm Rowntree in York.

They found that around a third of the nation's urban population were living below the 'poverty line' – the level of earnings needed in order not to starve.

The studies gained a lot of public attention – and they proved that poverty was nothing to do with 'moral weakness' but caused by low pay, sickness, old age, and unemployment.

These social conditions were starting to be seen as problems on a scale which the government could no longer ignore.