The Elizabethan Poor Laws

The Elizabethan Poor Laws were passed as a response to the increasing number of poor in Great Britain. During earlier times the lords were directly responsible for the care of their tenants. But the feudal system began to crumble and the tenant farmers lost their land. Having no source of relief, they drifted to the cities and larger towns. Few of this population had the skills to earn a living wage, and as their numbers increased, pauperism became a national problem. The first attempt to correct this problem was the enactment of voluntary alms to be collected in each parish. When this enactment did not alleviate the problems, an act was passed that required severe punishment for vagabonds and relief for the poor. This act led to an attempt to discriminate between the criminal population and the poor. Finally, the Poor Law of 1601 provided a clear definition of the "poor" and articulated services that they were to receive. This legislation is the foundation for the current social welfare system existing today in Great Britain. The following describes the Law.

Poor Law of 1601

By this act, two or more "substantial householders" were to be yearly nominated by the justices of the peace to serve as overseers of the poor in each parish. The overseers were to raise "weekly or otherwise, by taxation of every inhabitant, such competent sums of money as they shall think fit,"

a) for setting to work the children of all such whose parents shall not be thought able to keep and maintain them;
b) for setting to work all such persons, married and unmarried, having no means to maintain them, and who use no ordinary and daily trade of life to get their living by;
c) for providing a convenient stock of flax, hemp, wool, thread, iron, and other ware and stuff, to set the poor on work;
d) for the necessary relief of the lame, old, impotent, blind, and such other among them being poor and not able to work. Children whose parents cannot maintain them are to be apprenticed till the age of four-and-twenty years in the case of boys and twenty-one years or the time of marriage in the case of girls. The overseers may, with the leave of the Lord of the Manor, erect houses for the impotent poor on any waste
No provision is made for the erection of any house in which work may be done, and it was evidently intended that the flax, hemp, etc., should be worked up at the houses of the poor. But an act of 1576 had already empowered the justices of each country to erect "houses of correction" in which "such as be already grown up in idleness and so rogues at this present" should be set to work under strict prison discipline; and the justices were now ordered to commit to these places, or to the common jail, those who refused to work on materials provided by the parish. What they had to expect at the house of correction may be seen from one of the rules of the Suffolk House for the year 1589:

The Elizabethan Poor Laws (continued)

Item--it is ordered and agreed upon that every strong or sturdy rogue at his or her first entrance into the said house shall have twelve stripes upon his bare skin with the said whip provided for said house; and every young rogue or idle loiterer six stripes with the said whip in form aforesaid. And that every one of them, without fail, at their first coming into said house, shall have put upon him, her, or them some clogs, chain, collars of iron, ringle, or manacle, such as the keeper of the said house shall think meet.

This new act was only gradually carried out. In 1622 "A Wellwisher" complains, in a tract called "Grievous Groans for the Poor," that

tho the number of the poor do daily increase, there hath been no collection for them, no not these seven years, in many parishes of this land, especially in country towns; but many of those parishes turneth forth their poor, yea and their lusty that will not work, or for any misdemeanor want work, to beg, filch, and steal for their maintenance, so that the country is piti-fully pestered with them; yea, and the maimed soldiers that have ventured
their lives and lost their limbs on our behalf are also thus requited . .

. . So
they are turned forth to travel in idleness (the highway to hell) . .
until the
law bring them unto the fearful end of hanging.

SOURCE: Bliss (1908), pp. 918-920.