***Some important social, cultural and historical contexts***

**Social and cultural contexts:**

Dickens was not just a celebrated author; he was a social reformer, deeply concerned with the harsh plight of the working and lower classes – a situation he sought to remedy using his writing and the recognition that it brought him. He used his fame as a platform to reach a wide audience, publicising the deplorable conditions in which the poor and destitute lived and worked. He was particularly concerned by the health, well-being and treatment of children, always the most vulnerable members of any society and was profoundly affected by two things concerning children shortly before composing *‘A Christmas Carol’*.

The first was a Royal Commission report by Lord Shaftesbury on the terrible and shocking working conditions of children aged 10 years old and younger in underground coal mines. This led to a change in the law a year later, with the ***Mines Act*** of 1842 banning children under 10 years old from working “down the pit” (although a 16 hours-long working day for children was still legal until 1844, when it was reduced to a 9 hours-long working day, six days a week for 9 to 13 years old children!)

The second, about one month before he began writing the novella, occurred when Dickens visited the Field Lane ‘ragged school’ - funded solely by charity, for destitute children - and was so horrified by what he described as ***“the sickening atmosphere … of taint and dirt and pestilence”*** in the overcrowded, disease-ridden, poorly lit and ventilated building in a terrible state of disrepair that he resolved to do something about. His contribution to the political debate about poverty and social responsibility is his novella, *‘A Christmas Carol’.*

Dickens himself never quite experienced the same levels of poverty suffered by so many of his fellow Londoners but his own family was touched by hardship and separation. Dickens’ parents and some siblings were imprisoned in Marshalsea debtor’s prison because of his father’s debts and while Dickens and his sister Fanny were spared this indignity, they suffered the trauma of separation from their family. Dickens himself had to leave school during this time and went to work for several months in a factory. Speaking of this experience later, Dickens said he never forgot the ***“sense … of being utterly neglected and hopeless.”***

***POLITICS, POVERTY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY***

Dickens used his talents as an author to call attention to the plight of the poor in Victorian England, often raising the thorny question of who was ultimately responsible for the care of those less fortunate in society: the Government? The Church? Individuals? Some combination of all three?

Dickens’ characterisation of the ***“squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner”*** that is Ebenezer Scrooge who, when asked for a charitable donation to the poor at Christmas, demands to know: ***“Are there no prisons?”*** is nothing short of a satirical attack on sentiments widely held by members of the upper class in London society at the time his novella was published.

***‘The Poor Law’***

The Poor Law was the way that the poor were helped in 1815. The law said that each parish had to look after its own poor. If you were unable to work then you were given some money to help you survive. However, the cost of the Poor Law was increasing every year. By 1830 it cost about £7 million and criticism of the law was mounting.

The money was raised by taxes on middle and upper class people, causing resentment of poor people by the wealthy. The rich complained that their money was being spent on idle people who chose not to work. Critics also suggested that financial support was making the situation worse because it encouraged poor people to have children that they could not then afford to look after.

***‘The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act’***

In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act was passed by Parliament. This was designed to reduce the cost of looking after the poor as it stopped money going to poor people except in exceptional circumstances. Now if people wanted help they had to go into a workhouse to get it. The poor were given clothes and food in the workhouse in exchange for several hours of manual labour each day. Families were split up inside the workhouse. People had to wear a type of uniform, follow strict rules and were on a bad diet of bread and watery soup. Conditions were made so terrible that only those people who desperately needed help would go there.

Thomas Malthus was an economist who claimed that the population of England, notably London, was growing much faster than the country’s ability to feed it. He felt that population growth could be kept in check by war, famine or disease. His somewhat ghastly attitude to the ***“surplus population”***was arguably the inspiration for Dickens’ hard-hearted, hard-headed man of business, Ebenezer Scrooge who - when told that the poor would rather die than go to the workhouses - unashamedly asserts:

***“If they would rather die … they had better do it and decrease the surplus population!”***