**Women and Children in the Industrial Revolution**

Life for Women and Children during the Industrial Revolution was quite different to the way they can live today. This page looks at some of the things that women and children were expected to do during the industrial revolution and provides source material to show what people thought of this at the time.

Children during the Industrial Revolution.

At the start of the industrial Revolution there was no legislation about working conditions in mills, factories or other industrial plants. They simply had not been needed before. As factories spread rapidly the owners of mills, mines and other forms of industry needed large numbers of workers and they didn't want to have to pay them a high wage. Children were the ideal employees therefore! They were cheap, weren't big enough or educated enough to argue or complain and were small enough to fit between tight fitting machinery that adults couldn't get between. Children soon ended up working in all types of industry.

You may wonder why these children were not at school, this is simply because education in the early 19th century was not compulsory and in the majority of cases schools were expensive to send a child to, so working class families couldn't afford to send children there. Parents were quite willing to let children work in mills and factories as it provided the family with a higher income: one consequence of this was a high birth rate.

Nowadays lots of children have Saturday jobs or part time work after school. these jobs are carefully controlled and the government has made laws saying how long children can work for, what types of job they can and cannot do and what the minimum age for working is. Consider the evidence below to see how modern conditions compare with the working conditions of the early 19th century.

1. There was no restriction on the age of workers, nor on the number of hours that they could work. This led to children as young as 8 or 9 being required to work 12 or more hours a day.

3. Alexander Gray, a pump boy aged 10 years old. reported in 1842 Royal Commission into working conditions, said: "I pump out the water in the under bottom of the pit to keep the men’s room 9coal face) dry. I am obliged to pump fast or the water would cover me. I had to run away a few weeks ago as the water came up so fast that I could not pump at all. The water frequently covers my legs. I have been two years at the pump. I am paid 10d (old pence) a day. No holiday but the Sabbath (Sunday). I go down at three, sometimes five in the morning, and come up at six or seven at night.

<http://www.schoolshistory.org.uk/IndustrialRevolution/womenandchildren.htm>

That the shameful practice of child labour should have played an important role in the Industrial Revolution from its outset is not to be wondered at. The displaced working classes, from the seventeenth century on, took it for granted that a family would not be able to support itself if the children were not employed. In Defoe's day he thought it admirable that in the vicinity of Halifax scarcely anybody above the age of 4 was idle. The children of the poor were forced by economic conditions to work, as Dickens, with his family in debtor's prison, worked at age 12 in the Blacking Factory. In 1840 perhaps only twenty precent of the children of London had any schooling, a number which had risen by 1860, when perhaps half of the children between 5 and 15 were in some sort of school, if only a day school (of the sort in which Dickens's Pip finds himself in Great Expectations) or a Sunday school; the others were working. Many of the more fortunate found employment as apprentices to respectable trades (in the building trade workers put in 64 hours a week in summer and 52 in winter) or as general servants — there were over 120,000 domestic servants in London alone at mid-century, who worked 80 hour weeks for one halfpence per hour — but many more were not so lucky. Most prostitutes (and there were thousands in London alone) were between 15 and 22 years of age.

Many children worked 16 hour days under atrocious conditions, as their elders did. Ineffective parliamentary acts to regulate the work of workhouse children in factories and cotton mills to 12 hours per day had been passed as early as 1802 and 1819. After radical agitation, notably in 1831, when "Short Time Committees" organized largely by Evangelicals began to demand a ten hour day, a royal commission established by the Whig government recommended in 1833 that children aged 11-18 be permitted to work a maximum of twelve hours per day; children 9-11 were allowed to work 8 hour days; and children under 9 were no longer permitted to work at all (children as young as 3 had been put to work previously). This act applied only to the textile industry, where children were put to work at the age of 5, and not to a host of other industries and occupations. Iron and coal mines (where children, again, both boys and girls, began work at age 5, and generally died before they were 25), gas works, shipyards, construction, match factories, nail factories, and the business of chimney sweeping, for example (which Blake would use as an emblem of the destruction of the innocent), where the exploitation of child labour was more extensive, was to be enforced in all of England by a total of four inspectors. After further radical agitation, another act in 1847 limited both adults and children to ten hours of work daily.

<http://www.victorianweb.org/history/hist8.html>

For one or two minutes think about your lifestyle now. Make a few notes at the back of your exercise book about what you do now, how you spend your time, what you eat etc. Think about the number of times you have moaned about coming to school!! You are probably unaware but there are many laws that are directly linked to children your age. Not so much about what you can do but what you are not allowed to do. For example, did you know that children are not allowed down coal mines? Did you know that you are only allowed to work for a certain number of hours per week at a certain age?

Why were these laws brought in? Read the following passages about children in the C19………and you will begin to see why.

All the following passages are primary source evidence. This means that they came from people living at the time. This does not necessarily mean that they are accurate but they do give us a good idea of what life was like for children in the industrial cities of C19 Britain.

"Two children I know got employment in a factory when they were five years old………….the spinning men or women employ children if they can get a child to do their business……..the child is paid one shilling or one shilling and six pence, and they will take that (five year old) child before they take an older one who will cost more." George Gould, a Manchester merchant, written in 1816.

"The smallest child in the factories were scavengers……they go under the machine, while it is going……….it is very dangerous when they first come, but they become used to it." Charles Aberdeen worked in a Manchester cotton factory, written in 1832.

"The task first allotted to Robert Blincoe was to pick up the loose cotton, that fell upon the floor. Apparently nothing could be easier……..although he was much terrified by the whirling motion and noise of the machinery and the dust with which he was half suffocated………he soon felt sick and was constantly stooping; his back ached. Blincoe took the liberty to sit down. But this he soon found was strictly forbidden in cotton mills. His overlooker, Mr. Smith, told him he must keep on his legs. This he did for six and a half hours without a break." John Brown, a reporter for "The Lion". Written in 1828.

"We went to the mill at five in the morning. We worked until dinner time and then to nine or ten at night; on Saturday it could be till eleven and often till twelve at night. We were sent to clean the machinery on the Sunday." Man interviewed in 1849 who had worked in a mill as a child.

"In the evening I walked to Cromford and saw the children coming from their work. These children had been at work from 6 o’clock in the morning and it was now 7 o’clock in the evening." Joseph Farington, 22nd August 1801 (diary entry)

"I began work at the mill in Bradford when I was nine years old……we began at six in the morning and worked until nine at night. When business was brisk, we began at five and worked until ten in the evening." Hannah Brown, interviewed in 1832.

"Very often the children are woken at four in the morning. The children are carried on the backs of the older children asleep to the mill, and they see no more of their parents till they go home at night and are sent to bed." Richard Oastler, interviewed in 1832.

"Woodward and other overlookers used to beat me with pieces of thick leather straps made supple by oil, and having an iron buckle at the end, drew blood almost every time it was applied." John Brown quoted in the "Lion" newspaper in 1828.

"Sarah Golding was poorly and so she stopped her machine. James Birch, the overlooker, knocked her to the floor. She got up as well as she could. He knocked her down again. Then she was carried to her house.......she was found dead in her bed. There was another girl called Mary......she knocked her food can to the floor. The master, Mr. Newton, kicked her and caused her to wear away till she died. There was another, Caroline Thompson, who was beaten till she went out of her mind. The overlookers used to cut off the hair of any girl caught talking to a lad. This head shaving was a dreadful punishment. We were more afraid of it than any other punishment for girls are proud of their hair." An interview in 1849 with an unknown woman who worked in a cotton factory as a child.

"When I was seven years old I went to work at Mr Marshall’s factory at Shrewsbury. If a child became sleepy, the overlooker touches the child on the shoulder and says "come here". In the corner of the room there is an iron cistern filled with water. He takes the boy by the legs and dips him in the cistern, and then sends him back to work." Jonathan Downe interviewed in June 1832.

"I have seen my master, Luke Taylor, with a horse whip standing outside the mill when the children have come too late.........he lashed them all the way to the mill." John Fairbrother, an overlooker, interviewed in 1819.

"I work at the silk mill. I am an overlooker and I have to superintend the children at the mill. Their strength goes towards the evening and they get tired. I have been compelled to urge them to work when I knew they could not bear it. I have been disgusted with myself. I felt myself degraded and reduced to the level of a slave-driver. William Rastrick, interviewed in 1832.

<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/children_industrial_revolution.htm>