

Life in the Factories

When the Industrial Revolution first came to Britain and the U.S., there was a high demand for labor. Families quickly migrated from the rural farm areas to the newly industrialized cities to find work, this was known as urbanization. Once they got there, things did not look as bright as they did. To survive in even the lowest level of poverty, families had to have every able member of the family go to work. This led to the high rise in child labor in factories. Children were not treated well, overworked, and underpaid for a long time before anyone tried to change things for them.

Wages and Hours:

Men during the Industrial Revolution worked 14-16 hour days with one 45 minute break. Children as young as six years old during the Industrial Revolution worked hard hours for little or no pay. Children sometimes worked up to 14 hours a day, with a one-hour total break. This was a little bit on the extreme, but it was not uncommon for men and children who worked in factories to work 12-14 hours with minimal breaks.

“In reality there were no regular hours, masters and managers did with us as they liked. The clocks in the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night. Though this was known amongst the hands, we were afraid to speak, and a workman then was afraid to carry a watch.”

Not only were these men and children subject to long hours, but also, they were in horrible conditions. Large, heavy, and dangerous equipment was very common for children to be using or working near. Many accidents occurred, injuring or killing many on the job. Not until the Factory Act of 1833 did things improve. Children were paid only a fraction of what an adult would get, and sometimes factory owners would get away with paying them nothing. Orphans were the ones subject to this slave-like labor. The factory owners justified their absence of payroll by saying that they gave the orphans food, shelter, and clothing, all of which were far below par. The children who did get paid were paid very little.

1. Explain life in the factory for the children in this work system.

Treatment:

The treatment of children in factories was often cruel and unusual, and the children's safety was generally neglected. The youngest children, who were not old enough to work the machines, were commonly sent to be assistants to textile workers. The people who the children served would beat them, verbally abuse them, and take no consideration for their safety. Both boys and girls who worked in factories were subject to beatings and other harsh forms of pain infliction.

“When I was seven years old I went to work at Mr. Marshall’s factory at Shrewsbury. If a child was drowsy, the overlooker touches the child on the shoulder and says, “Come here”. In a 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 sends him back to work.”

One common punishment for being late or not working up to quota would be to be "weighted." An overseer would tie a heavy weight to worker's neck, and have them walk up and down the factory aisles so the other children could see them and "take example." This could last up to an hour. Weighting could lead to serious injuries in the back and/or neck. Punishments such as this would often be dispensed under stringent rules. Boys were sometimes dragged naked from their beds and sent to the factories only

holding their clothes, to be put on there. This was to make sure the boys would not be late, even by a few minutes.

Another punishment would be to be placed in chains, *“The blacksmith had the task of riveting irons upon any of the apprentices, whom the master ordered. These irons were very much like the irons usually put upon felons. Even young women, if they suspected of intending to run away, had irons riveted on their ankles, and reaching by long links and rings up to the hips, and in these they were compelled to walk to and fro from the mill to work and to sleep.”*

Accidents were also a common occurrence in the factories. *“When I was a surgeon in the infirmary, accidents were very often admitted to the infirmary, through the children's hands and arms having being caught in the machinery; in many instances the muscles, and the skin is stripped down to the bone, and in some instances a finger or two might be lost. Last summer I visited Lever Street School. The number of children at that time in the school, who were employed in factories, was 106. The number of children who had received injuries from the machinery amounted to very nearly one half. There were forty-seven injured in this way.”*

This is an eye-witness account to one of the many accidents that occur in factories. *“I was an eye-witness of one. A child was working wool, that is, to prepare the wool for the machine; but the strap caught him, as he was hardly awake, and it carried him into the machinery; and we found one limb in one place, one in another, and he was cut to bits; his whole body went in, and was mangled.”*

1. Describe the treatment of the children in factories.
2. What kinds of accidents happened in the factories?

Child labor: Movements to Regulate

There were people in this time period that strongly advocated the use or the abolishment of child labor, or at least the improvement of conditions. Factory owners loved child labor, and they supported their reasoning with ideas that it was good for everything from the economy to the building of the children's characters. Parents of the children who worked were almost forced to at least approve of it because they needed the income. There were, however, some important figures that fought for the regulation, improvement, and/or abolishment of child labor. The first step to improving conditions was in 1833 with the Factory Act passed by Parliament. This limited the amount of hours children of certain ages could work. Specifically, children 9 to 13 years of age were only allowed to work 8 hours a day. Those 14 to 18 years of age could not work more than 12 hours a day. Children under 9 were not allowed to work at all. Also, the children were to attend school for no less than two hours during the day. Perhaps the most important part of this act was the part that said the government would appoint officials to make sure the act was carried out and complied with. Later, in the early 20th century, activists went even further to protect children's rights in labor. Among these figures was Jane Addams, founder of the Hull House. Activists in the U.S. made the government set up the Children's Bureau in 1912. This made it the U.S. government's responsibility to monitor child labor.

1. How was child labor regulated over the years of the Industrial Revolution?

Accounts of Child Labor

Joseph Hebergram was interviewed by Michael Sadler's Parliamentary Committee on 1st June, 1832.

Question: What were your hours of labour?

Answer: From five in the morning till eight at night.

Question: You had fourteen and a half hours of actual labour, at seven years of age?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Did you become very drowsy and sleepy towards the end of the day?

Answer: Yes; that began about three o'clock; and grew worse and worse, and it came to be very bad towards six and seven.

Question: How long was it before the labour took effect on your health?

Answer: Half a year.

Question: How did it affect your limbs?

Answer: When I worked about half a year a weakness fell into my knees and ankles: it continued, and it got worse and worse.

Question: How far did you live from the mill?

Answer: A good mile.

Question: Was it painful for you to move?

Answer: Yes, in the morning I could scarcely walk, and my brother and sister used, out of kindness, to take me under each arm, and run with me to the mill, and my legs dragged on the ground; in consequence of the pain I could not walk.

Question: Were you sometimes late?

Answer: Yes, and if we were five minutes too late, the overlooker would take a strap, and beat us till we were black and blue.

Question: From your observations, should you say that the children become crippled in their limbs?

Answer: Yes, I have seen various instances of their being crippled, and their limbs growing crooked. I know that the girls have frequently bad legs, with running sores; in fact, I may say so of factory people in general.

1. Describe life for this child.

Accounts of Child Labor

Elizabeth Bentley was interviewed by Michael Sadler and his House of Commons Committee on 4th June, 1832.

Question: What were your hours of labour?

Answer: As a child I worked from five in the morning till nine at night.

Question: What time was allowed for meals?

Answer: We were allowed forty minutes at noon.

Question: Did you have time to eat it?

Answer: No; we were obliged to leave it or to take it home, and when we did not take it, the overlooker took it, and gave it to the pigs.

Question: Suppose you flagged a little, or were late, what would they do?

Answer: Strap us.

Question: What work did you do?

Answer: A weicher in the card-room.

Question: What is the carding-room like?

Answer: Dusty. You cannot see each other for dust.

Question: Did working in the card-room affect your health?

Answer: Yes; it was so dusty, the dust got up my lungs, and the work was so hard. I was so weak, that when I pulled the baskets down, I pulled my bones out of their places.

Question: You are considerably deformed in your person in consequence of this labour?

Answer: Yes, I am.

Question: At what time did it come on?

Answer: I was about thirteen years old when it began coming, and it has got worse since. When my mother died I had to look after myself.

Question: Where are you now?

Answer: In the poor house.

Question: You are utterly incapable of working in the factories?

Answer: Yes

Question: You worked as long as you were able, from your earliest age?

Answer: Yes.

Question: And you supported your widowed mother as long as you could?

Answer: Yes.

1. Describe the life of this child.