

22.2 Child Labor Inquiry

In this excerpt, a clothier is asked about the condition and behavior of children working in the mills.

Source: British Sessional Papers 1831–1832, House of Commons vol. XV, pp. 17–19; reprinted in *Documents in World History*, vol. 2: *The Modern Centuries: From 1500 to the Present*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, et al., (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), pp. 26–27.

Mr. Abraham Whitehead

431. What is your business?—A clothier.
432. Where do you reside?—At Scholes, near Holmfirth.
433. Is not that in the centre of very considerable woollen mills? Yes, for a space of three or four miles; I live nearly in the centre of thirty or forty woollen mills....
436. Are the children and young persons of both sexes employed in these mills?—Yes.
437. At how early an age are children employed?—The youngest age at which children are employed is never under five, but some are employed between five and six in woollen mills at piecing.
438. How early have you observed these young children going to their work, speaking for the present in the summer time?—In the summer time I have frequently seen them going to work between five and six in the morning, and I know the general practice is for them to go as early to all the mills....
439. How late in the evening have you seen them at work, or remarked them returning to their homes?—I have seen them at work in the summer season between nine and ten in the evening; they continue to work as long as they can see, and they can see to work in these mills as long as you could see to read....
441. You say that on your own personal knowledge?—I live near to parents who have been sending their children to mills for a great number of years, and I know positively that these children are every morning in the winter seasons called out of bed between five and six, and in some instances between four and five.
442. Your business as a clothier has often led you into these mills?—Frequently;...
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460. What has been the treatment which you have observed that these children received at the mills, to keep them attentive for so many hours at such early ages?—They are generally cruelly treated; so cruelly treated, that they dare not hardly for their lives be too late at their work in a morning.... My heart has been ready to bleed for them when I have seen them so fatigued, for they appear in such a state of apathy and insensibility as really not to know whether they are doing their work or not;...
461. Do they frequently fall into errors and mistakes in piecing when thus fatigued?—Yes; the errors they make when thus fatigued are, that instead of placing the cording in this way [describing it], they are apt to place them obliquely, and that causes a flying, which makes bad yarn; and when the billy-spinner sees that, he takes his strap or the billy-roller, and says, "Damn thee, close it-little devil, close it," and they smite the child with the strap or the billy-roller....
510. You say that the morals of the children are very bad when confined in these mills; what do you consider to be the situation of children who have nothing to do, and are running about such towns as Leeds, with no employment to keep them out of mischief?—Children that are not employed in mills are generally more moral and better behaved than children who are employed in mills.
511. Those in perfect idleness are better behaved than those that are employed?—That is not a common thing; they either employ them in some kind of business at home, or send them to school.
512. Are there no day-schools to which these factory children go?—They have no opportunity of going to school when they are thus employed at the mill.

Questions:

1. Based on what these investigations reveal, how would you describe work in the factories and mines? Consider hours, food, work conditions, discipline, regulations, etc.
2. What elements do you think particularly troubled the educated, middle-class investigators? Why?