The Conditions For Factory Workers In Nineteenth Century Britain

In the nineteenth century some people thought that factories were the best thing that ever created in Great Britain, however, workers inside them thought differently.

No group was as exploited as children, who were put to work before they could read or write.Children were employed in industry and agriculture as soon as they started using their hands and were able to walk. They worked in farms, mills, factories, coalmines and on the streets. They sacrificed having an education for working long hours for little money, working in unacceptable conditions for employers who had no interest in safety.

Children were put to work because in cities with overpriced rents and plenty of expenses, families could not get by on simply two incomes.

Children who worked indoors were often exposed to toxic fumes, extreme heat, and dangerous machinery. Those who worked in glass factories often cut or burned themselves on broken or hot glass. Children in textile mills were forced to breathe in dust and cotton fibers. Many suffered permanent lung damage. Small and nimble children were assigned to equipment that required quick motions. Those who operated machinery designed for adults often lost fingers. Working long days meant they sometimes fell asleep on the job, putting them at risk for serious injury. A Manchester spinner explains that they are “locked up in factories eight stories high, (the worker) has no relaxation till the ponderous engine stops, and then they go home to get refreshed for the next day; no time for sweet association with their families; they are all alike fatigued and exhausted.”

In 1831, John Hobhouse, the M.P. for Westminister decided to introduce a bill restricting child labour. Hobhouse proposed that: (a) no child should work in a factory before the age of 9; (b) no one between the ages of 9 and 18 should work for more than twelve hours; (c) no one aged between the ages of 9 and 18 should work for more than 66 hours a week; (d) no one under 18 should be allowed to do night work.

The Factory Act, 1833 was an attempt to set up a normal working day in a single department of industry, textile manufacture. The way in which it planned to do this was the following: The working day was to start at 5.30 a.m. and stop at 8.30 p.m. A young person (aged thirteen to eighteen) might

not be employed beyond any period of twelve hours, excluding one and a half for meals,and a child (aged nine to thirteen) beyond any period of nine hours. From 8.30 p.m. to 5.30 a.m.; that is during the night,the employment of s uch people was forbidden.

The Factory Act of 1844 is an extremely important one in the history of family legislation. The Act reduced the hours of work for children between eight and thirteen to six and a half a day, either in the morning or afternoon, no child being allowed to work in both on the same day, except on alternate days, and then only for ten hours. Young persons and women (now included for the first time) were to have the same hours, i.e. not more than twelve for the first five days of the week (with one and a half out for meals), and nine on Saturday.

Certificates of age were to be granted in future only by surgeons appointed for the purpose. Accidents causing death or bodily injury were to be reported to these surgeons, who were to investiga te their cause and report the result to the inspector. The factory was to be thoroughly washed with lime every fourteen months. A Register was likewise to be kept; in which were to be entered the names of all children and young persons employed, the dates of the lime-washing, and some other particulars. Certificates of school attendance were to be obtained in the case of children.

A few Acts were passed since the one in 1844 and several changes were made but the last one was the Factory Act in 1891, which m ade the requirements for fencing machinery more strict and raised the minimum age at which a child can be set to work from ten to eleven.

The use of pauper apprentices

Many parents were unwilling to allow their children to work in these new textile factories. To overcome this labour shortage,factory owners had to find other ways of obtaining workers. One solution to the problem was to obtain children from orphanages and workhouses. These children became known as pauper apprentices. This involved them signi ng contracts that virtually made them the property of the factory owner.

One of the first factory owners to employ this system was Samuel Greg, who owned the large Quarry Bank Mill at Styal. Greg had difficulty finding enough people to work for him. Manchester was eleven miles away and local villages were very small. Imported workers needed cottages, and these cost about £100 each.

By 1790 Greg became convinced that the best solution to his labour problem was to build an Apprentice House and to purchas e children from workhouses. The building for the apprentices cost £300 and provided living accommodation for over 90 children. At first the children came from local parishes such as Wilmslow and Macclesfield, but later he went as far as Liverpool and Londo n to find these young workers. To encourage factory owners to take workhouse

children, people like Greg were paid between £2 and £4 for each child they employed. Greg also demanded that the children were sent to him with "two shifts, two pairs of stockings and two aprons.

The 90 children (60 girls and 30 boys) at Styal made up 50% of the total workforce. The children received their board and lodging, and two pence a week. The younger children worked as scavengers and piecers, but after a couple of years at Styal they were allowed to become involved in spinning and carding. Some of the more older boys became skilled mechanics.

The Apprentice House at Styal

Factory owners were responsible for providing their pauper apprentices with food. Children constantly complained about the quality of the food.

In most textile mills the children had to eat their meals while still working. This meant that the food tended to get covered with the dust from the cloth.

Sarah Carpenter was interviewed by *The Ashton Chronicle* on 23rd June, 1849:
Our common food was oatcake. It was thick and coarse. This oatcake was put into cans. Boiled milk and water was poured into it. This was our breakfast and supper. Our dinner was potato pie with boiled bacon it, a bit here and a bit there, so thick with fat we could scarce eat it, though we were hungry enough to eat anything. Tea we never saw, nor butter. We had cheese and brown bread once a year. We were only allowed three meals a day though we got up at five in the morning and worked till nine at night.

Matthew Crabtree was interviewed by Michael Sadler's Parliamentary Committee (18th May, 1832):
I began work at Cook's of Dewsbury when I was eight years old. We had to eat our food in the mill. It was frequently covered by flues from the wool; and in that case they had to be blown off with the mouth, and picked off with the fingers, before it could be eaten.