“Working conditions were terrible in 19th century Britain.”
Does the evidence support this view?

Working conditions varied in different areas of work. In general, they improved over time and towards the end of the nineteenth century many laws and acts had been passed that made conditions better. The working conditions were not the same for all social groups, the middle class people who worked as shop keepers, clerks and skills men still had to work hard but their lives were not as bad as the working class. The early factory workers were treated like slaves and were forced to behave as if they were machines. I do think conditions were terrible for many people especially factory workers and miners. I will explain and discuss in detail more about this later on.

People began to build factories at the beginning of the eighteenth century and there were very few regulations. Factory workers worked in hot and damp overcrowded rooms for long hours and little pay. Children as young as four were made to go and work in mills. Many of these children were paupers and orphans who worked for little or no pay. Work in a mill started very early in the morning, often about six in the morning and they would work until seven-thirty at night with only ten minutes for breakfast, an hour for lunch and twenty minutes for tea. Source 5 is written by an MP at the time so is therefore a primary source. He talks about decreasing the working hours for adults and children, at the beginning he says, *“Here, then, is the "curse" of our factory-system; as improvements in machinery have gone on, the "avarice of masters" has prompted many to exact more labour from their hands than they were fitted by nature to perform.”* This basically means that as improvements to the machines were made, Mill Owners started expecting more and more from their workers to produce metres of cotton that could then be sold and a profit made. This source was written in 1836 and is quite standard. Everyone in the family, who could work, would work, so child labour became a big problem. The table in source thirteen shows that most boys between eleven and sixteen worked in the factories and most girls worked in the factories between eleven and twenty-one. These figures were taken before the law in 1833 was passed. Laws and acts were passed to improve working conditions for everyone but mainly children. In 1833 a Factory Act was passed allowing no one under the age of nine to work, children between the ages of nine and thirteen were not allowed to work any more than nine hours a day and no children between thirteen and eighteen were allowed to work more than twelve hours. No children were allowed to work at night either and all had to have two hours of schooling everyday. This law was introduced throughout the whole of the country, but this did not mean the mistreatment of children stopped straight away. Fourteen years later in 1847 another law was passed allowing no one under the age of eighteen to work more than ten hours a day. Factory inspectors visited the mills to make sure the new laws were obeyed. Children were watched by overseers and if they caught a child falling asleep, or slacking in their work then they whipped the child until they were black or blue. Parents often watched their children getting beaten but there was nothing they could do for fear of losing their job. The jobs children had to do were hard. One child was known as a “scavenger” and they had to crawl underneath the mules picking up fluff. Another job was as a “doffer”, this was lifting out bobbins full of cotton and replacing them with empty ones. Many doffers spent their days bent over their machines, one source written in 1848 says, “..And they never quite seem to straighten up again after working as a doffer.” I think this source

can be trusted as I have found more than one source that says this; it is also a primary source. It is useful for showing the strain on people's bodies after working. Another mill owner, Robert Owen stated when he took over a mill, "Many of them became dwarfs in body and mind, and some of them were deformed." Again showing that the work was hard, manual and stunted the growth of many children, so I think it is reliable and should be trusted. *Hansard took part in a Parliamentary Debate in 1879. "In 1838, being desirous to see the condition of the children--for I knew that they were employed at very early ages in the worsted business....I asked for a collection of cripples and deformities. In a short time more than 80 were gathered in a large courtyard."* To have eighty cripples in one factory, shows how easy it was to get injured; this is a typical source (source 7). Another source similar to this is source 14 written by Dr. Ward from Manchester in March, 1819. He wrote about how many accidents occurred and he who he saw in an infirmary. Nearly half the children working in one factory were injured the same way. This source I think is reliable because he is an independent source not someone who worked in the factory, and is one of the few sources I have found nearer the beginning of the nineteenth century. Source 12 shows all the deformed children in one factory, the boy at the front has lost both his legs and others have lost a leg or an arm. The photo was taken in 1931, two years before it was made illegal for children under the age of nine to work in factories, photographic evidence like this, is very important. Some people did not just lose limbs in the machines, some lost their lives. Source 15 tells of a boy who lost his life and they found his body mangled in the machine. We can trust the source mainly but it may have been a bit exaggerated.

Not all factories were as terrible, Robert Owen was a factory owner in New Lanark. He treated his workers well, he gave them clean houses, and he sold food and clothes at cheap prices. Many of the changes he made to his factory and his worker's lives were for the best. He also gave the children of his workers two hours of schooling everyday. Robert Owen's workers were fit, healthy and happy and as a result they worked hard and Robert Owen made a large profit. He tried to get others to do the same but they did not, until laws making factory owners do this were introduced. In mills about two-thirds of the workers were women and children as mill owners found them easier to control and thought they would not complain as much about working conditions. A writer visited a mill in Glasgow and this is what he said, "..Glasgow cotton mill where young women workers, some of them pregnant, had to stand for twelve hours a day" from this account you can see that conditions for these people were very hard and from the hard work many of them were thin and pale. A source written by P. Gaskell in 1833 (source 6) shows just how ill and unhealthy many of them were, he says, "*Their complexion is sallow and pallid ...the average height of four hundred men, measured at different times, and different places, being five feet six inches....Their limbs slender... A very general bowing of the legs"* The growth of many of these people was stunted as P. Gaskell tells us. The source he wrote is not exceptional as many government MPs and factory reformers wrote about the terrible health many factory workers were in.

To stand up for themselves and to try and improve their lives, workers in Preston went on strike for thirty-six weeks seeking a ten percent rise. To raise money, they made up songs which they then sold copies of.

Weavers would supervise two to four looms at a time, the noise the looms made were deafening, one lady claimed, "..Could not sleep at night for the roar of the machines stayed in my head." Conditions were not only damp and hot because of having to stop the cotton from snapping but they were also very noisy too. Factory

workers could receive fines for being late, opening windows, whistling, being ill (source 17, page 19, History Text Book). Mill owners could tell if someone was late because they had a special clocking in and clocking out system, so they would know if anyone was late or signed out early. People did not have clocks and if they were just fifteen minutes left they would be fined. Source nine was written in 1832 and is an example of what would happen if you were late, this source can be trusted because it was given to Parliament. People did not have clocks because they were not allowed to, source ten tells us this. The source is from a Parliamentary Committee report taken 1832. We can trust it mainly but Parliament was against long hours in factories so they may have taken what the worker said and exaggerated it a bit. It was harsh, when the wages were given; money had already been taken off for the rent of the workers cottages, purchases from the mill store and fines. One mill owner liked to show off the mill that he ran so cheaply in 1878 a mill owner wrote (source 1). This mill owner was trying to make as much money as possible, ignoring the consequences of his factory being described, "Rocked like a ship". Most mills had their own food stores in which workers had to buy the poor quality goods at high prices or else they were sacked, though Robert Owen did the opposite with his store in New Lanark, he swapped tokens in exchange for high quality produce. Mill owners made steady improvements throughout the country. In 1823, Samuel Greg opened a school and a village store. He also employed a doctor to check on their health. Another mill owner, Sir Titus Salt was horrified by the filth in Mill Towns. In 1853 he built a village around his factory and instead of building small, cramped terrace houses; he built large comfortable houses on wide streets. Along with the houses he built a church, school and park. His workers made up a song to praise Sir Titus Salt. (Source 2) This song was passed down generations, so I can not be sure if the words have changed a little, but it is fairly reliable, and I think we can trust it. It is an exceptional source as not many songs were written praising their factory owners during the nineteenth century. Factory workers had lost their independence, many of them used to work at home and then could control when they worked, but when they worked in the factories, the factory bell ruled their lives.

One of the industries that had expanded very rapidly in the 19th century was coal mining. Industry needed more coal to drive steam engines and locomotives in the factories. To get more coal they had to dig bigger and deeper mines. In the middle of the 18th century, most coal mines in Britain were near the surface and mining was a not a large industry. In the second half of the century surface coal began to run out and mines became deeper. Deeper mines were much more dangerous. There was not only a much greater risk of rock falls and flooding, but miners could also run into gas underground that could lead to explosions or suffocation. The work miners had to do was long and hard, they had to mine coal with axes, load it into carts and then drag it back to the surface. It was a strain on their muscles, and it was very dark and cramped. They would work continuously until it was the end of the day. One girl aged twelve worked in the mines and she said, "*Cannot say how many rakes or journeys I make from pit's bottom to wall face and back, thinks about 30 or 25 on the average; the distance varies from 100 to 250 fathom.*" This shows that as well as the work being heavy, it often had to be pulled a very long way. This source is a primary source and I think it can be trusted. Miners had virtually nothing to protect themselves against the dangers. Source 3 shows two miners, you can see that neither of them are wearing protective clothing or hard hats. The clothes that they are wearing are ragged, the picture was taken in 1859 in the middle of the nineteenth century, as you can see

the conditions had not improved by 1859. Some miners took canaries underground to warn them against gas, if the canary stopped singing that was a sign that gas was present. To try to prevent the roof caving in, miners left columns of coal standing, but coal can collapse very easily, so this was not a safe method of working. Ventilation became a serious problem as miners went deeper and deeper underground, miners could run out of oxygen. To make sure that the fresh air reached all parts of the mine, trapdoors were put in all the mines, which were opened and closed as the coal trucks passed through. This ensured that there was a constant supply of air throughout the mine. The trapdoors were opened by small boys and girls called trappers they used to have to sit for hours and hours at a time, in the dark it was not good for their health and many became blind. The most serious danger of all was caused by the need for light. At first miners carried candles underground, but this proved to be very dangerous, as gas could ignite without warning. In all, it was dark dangerous and deadly work. Throughout the 19th century more than a thousand miners were killed every year in Britain. The conditions were terrible; miners had to work in dark, damp and cramped conditions. Women and children were often made to do the hard manual work that men should do, but they didn't get paid the same amount as men would have. Miners went a large strike in 1826 but did not strike again until 1878. Special badges were made for miners to wear, to show they were protesting (source 4). Mining was among the most dangerous of all the work, the conditions were terrible too.

Not everyone worked in the factories or mines there were other jobs too. Until the 1870s, poor children did not normally attend school; many of them went out to work instead. Street selling was a good job for children, people claimed because it was healthy, open air work. In 1851 there were 30,000 street sellers on the streets of London. Most were children, some as young as six, not many women or men worked in the street selling trade though. There was a variety of street sellers, some sold bread and pies, while others offered services. Some services offered were knife grinders, people who chopped fire wood, held horses or mending. There were also shoes-black boys at work in 1888. Their work was long and they were on their feet all day, in winter it was very cold too. A street seller's work starts very early in the morning. Their lives were hard, but the conditions were not that terrible.

Throughout Britain many women in the nineteenth century worked as domestic servants. Only a handful of households in a district were able to employ servants such as butler, footman, governess, skilled cook, housekeeper, senior parlour-maid, head house-maid and lady's maid, as well as the more common servants including kitchen-maid, scullery-maid, laundress, nursemaid, housemaid, and stable-boy. For smaller households the priority was to employ the more common female servants to perform the dirty, heavy work. As soon as a family's income reached about £150 per year, they would employ a young teenage girl as a general servant. She usually worked fourteen to sixteen hours daily. If the family had a shop she would also serve behind the counter. Many maids were employed by lodging-house keepers to do the washing up, clean out all the grates, sweep and scrub the floors and to run up and down stairs carrying buckets of coal, cans of hot water and breakfasts, and most houses were several storeys high.

As a family's income rose, so did the number of its servants. A housemaid and cook were the priority. Only wealthy people employed male domestic servants since there

was a servant tax on them. The many wealthy visitors who came for the summer often brought with them a lady's maid, while other servants were engaged locally or were included with the property when rented for the season. According to the 1891 Census, the servant class was among the largest groups of the working population: 1,386,167 females and 58,527 males were indoor servants in private homes out of a population of twenty-nine million in England and Wales. This is a very large proportion. Life was long hard for domestic servants, they had to work long hours, but at least it was in large, clean houses rather than dirty, cramped mines. A domestic servant's work was never over, there was always some cleaning to do, or washing to be done. It was hard to get a job as a servant because the family had to be sure you were reliable and hard-working, so to become a servant you needed to have good references. It also helped if you knew the family. The working conditions that servants had to work in were not terrible, but their lives were hard and not very well paid, and as a result of this many of them left to go and work in the factories which paid better wages. One source written at the end of the nineteenth century said, "Many daughters of former servants nursed a sense of resentment towards their employers, not necessarily because they themselves were treated badly, but because of the tales they had heard from their mothers, relations and friends. Antagonism against 'them upstairs' was part of their social inheritance." This does not say anything much about the conditions that they had to work in but it meant that work was even more of a chore for them as they did not like the family.

Until the 1870s farmers grew plenty of food to provide for Britain's growing population. They were only paid ten shillings a week, even less than factory workers. Much of their work was very hard and in the summer they had to work from dawn until dusk. They were often provided with houses though and they did not have all the dirt and disease of the city. During the last thirty years of the nineteenth century there were several bad harvests and as a result corn and meat had to be cheaply imported from other countries. Many farms went bankrupt and farm labourers left to find work in the cities and factories. New machinery was then introduced into farms. Although the conditions for farm labourers were not dark and as dangerous as the mines were, for the work that they did do they were paid little, but they were often laid off when the weather was too bad to work outside and so their income was not reliable. Farmers became less inclined to hire farm-help as farm labour was needed at only certain parts of the year and not others.

In conclusion I think that working conditions were terrible at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but by passing laws to make conditions better, conditions were improved. They were particularly bad in the areas of work such as factories and mining. Factory conditions were not terrible everywhere though, Robert Owen is a prime example of a factory where the workers were fit and healthy. Many mill owners were just too greedy, and were concentrating more on making a profit that their workers lives. Child labour was also a big issue, because they needed paying less, Mill Owners employed them to do the hard manual jobs men should do. Even though factory worker's wages were low, they did earn more than people working on the farms and domestic servants. By the end of the nineteenth century factory working conditions had improved. There was still room for a lot more improvement but they were a lot better than they were at the beginning of the century. Mining had the worst conditions, as it was dark; and they had to pull heavy loads in cramped tunnels, and there was always the fear of a flood or gas. Conditions did not improve very much. The first decade of the new century saw the beginning of the end of the great age of

servants. By 1911 there had been a noticeable drop in the number of domestic servants compared to the figures of 1891, to 1,271, 990 - 114,277 fewer. Apart from opportunities in shops and factories attracting more women, the growth of education also contributed to less domestic servants. Farms started using more machines and so the need for farm labourers was even less and many of them left to go to the factories. In 1902 the Balfour Education Act brought in secondary education and raised the school-leaving age from ten to twelve, with more education people started to specialise in jobs in certain areas and become skilled workers. In the end conditions did improve but it did not happen naturally a lot of laws were passed until conditions were a lot better in all areas of work.

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Sources

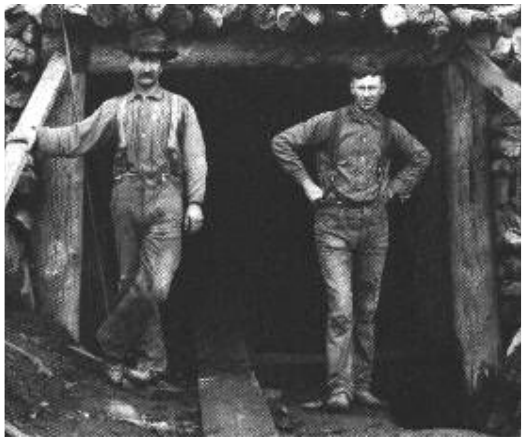
Source 1- a Mill owner, quoted in The Hungry Mills by Norman Longmate, 1978

"He came to view with amusement the horrified reactions of visitors to the ancient four-storey building with its hundred looms on each floor, so that it rocked like a ship"

Source 2- Traditional, 1870

He hath built up a palace to Labour,
Will equal the Caesars of old,
The Church and the School and the Cottage,
And lavished his thousands of gold:
Where the workmen may live and be happy,
Enjoying the fruits of his hand,
Surrounded with comfort and plenty,
Secure as a peer of the land"

Source 3- Picture taken in 1859



Source 4- A badge that was made during strikes in 1985

Source 5- John Fielden, M.P., The Curse of the Factory System. London, 1836

"Here, then, is the "curse" of our factory-system; as improvements in machinery have gone on, the "avarice of masters" has prompted many to exact more labour from their hands than they were fitted by nature to perform, and those who have wished for the hours of labour to be less for all ages than the legislature would even yet sanction, have had no alternative but to conform more or less to the prevailing practice, or abandon the trade altogether. This has been the case with regard to myself and my

partners. We have never worked more than seventy-one hours a week before Sir JOHN HOBHOUSE'S Act was passed. We then came down to sixty-nine; and since Lord ALTHORP's Act was passed, in 1833, we have reduced the time of adults to sixty-seven and a half hours a week, and that of children under thirteen years of age to forty-eight hours in the week, though to do this latter has, I must admit, subject ed us to much inconvenience, but the elder hands to more, inasmuch as the relief given to the child is in some measure imposed on the adult. But the overworking does not apply to children only; the adults are also overworked. The increased speed given to machinery within the last thirty years, has, in very many instances, doubled the labour of both."

Source 6- P. Gaskell, The Manufacturing Population of England. London , 1833

"Any man who has stood at twelve o'clock at the single narrow door -way, which serves as the place of exit for the hands employed in the great cotton -mills, must acknowledge, that an uglier set of men and women, of boys and girls, taking them in the mass, it would be impossible to congregate in a smaller compass. Their complexion is sallow and pallid--with a peculiar flatness of feature, caused by the want of a proper quantity of adipose substance to cushion out the cheeks. Their stature low--the average height of four hundred men, measured at different times, and different places, being five feet six inches. Their limbs slender, and playing badly and ungracefully. A very general bowing of the legs. Great numbers of girls and women walking lamely or awkwardly, with raised chests and spinal flexures. Nearly all have flat feet, accompanied with a down-tread, differing very widely from the elasticity of action in the foot and ankle, attendant upon perfect formation. Hair thin and straight --many of the men having but little beard, and that in patches of a few hairs, much resembling its growth among the red men of America. A spiritless and dejected air, a sprawling and wide action of the legs, and an appearance, taken as a whole, giving the world but "little assurance of a man," or if so, "most sadly cheated of his fair proportions..."

Factory labour is a species of work, in some respects singularly unfitted for children. Cooped up in a heated atmosphere, debarred the necessary exercise, remaining in one position for a series of hours, one set or system of muscles alone called into activity, it cannot be wondered at--that its effects are injurious to the physical growth of a child. Where the bony system is still imperfect, the vertical position it is compelled to retain, influences its direction; the spinal column bends beneath the weight of the head, bulges out laterally, or is dragged forward by the weight of the parts composing the chest, the pelvis yields beneath the opposing pressure downwards, and the resistance given by the thigh -bones; its capacity is lessened, sometimes more and sometimes less; the legs curve, and the whole body loses height, in consequence of this general yielding and bending of its parts."

Source 7- The Benefit of the Factory Legislation

Hansard's Parliamentary Debates. Apr. 4, 1879.

"The other is the old, the often-repeated, and as often-refuted, argument that the work is light. Light! Why, no doubt, much of it is light, if measured by the endurance of some three or four minutes. But what say you, my Lords, to a continuity of toil, in a standing posture, in a poisonous atmosphere, during 13 hours, with 15 minutes of rest? Why, the stoutest man in England, were he made, in such a condition of things,

to do nothing during the whole of that time but be erect on his feet and stick pins in a pincushion, would sink under the burden. What say you, then, of children--children of the tenderest years? Why, they become stunted, crippled, deformed, useless. I speak what I know--I state what I have seen. When I visited Bradford, in Yorkshire, in 1838, being desirous to see the condition of the children--for I knew that they were employed at very early ages in the worsted business....I asked for a collection of cripples and deformities. In a short time more than 80 were gathered in a large courtyard. They were mere samples of the entire mass. I assert without exaggeration that no power of language could describe the varieties, and I may say, the cruelties, in all these degradations of the human form. They stood or squatted before me in all the shapes of the letters of the alphabet. This was the effect of prolonged toil on the tender frames of children at early ages. When I visited Bradford, under the limitation of hours some years afterwards, I called for a similar exhibition of cripples; but, God be praised! There was not one to be found in that vast city. Yet the work of these poor sufferers had been light, if measured by minutes, but terrific when measured by hours."

Source 8- Isabella Read, 12 years old, coal-bearer.

"Works on mother's account, as father has been dead two years. Mother bides at home, she is troubled with bad breath, and is sair weak in her body from early labour. I am wrought with sister and brother, it is very sore work; cannot say how many rakes or journeys I make from pit's bottom to wall face and back, thinks about 30 or 25 on the average; the distance varies from 100 to 250 fathom.

I carry about 1 cwt. and a quarter on my back; have to stoop much and creep through water, which is frequently up to the calves of my legs. When first down fell frequently asleep while waiting for coal from heat and fatigue.

I do not like the work, nor do the lassies, but they are made to like it. When the weather is warm there is difficulty in breathing, and frequently the lights go out. "

Source 9- Elizabeth Bentley, interviewed by Michael Sadler's Parliamentary Committee on 4th June, 1832.

"I worked from five in the morning till nine at night. I lived two miles from the mill. We had no clock. If I had been too late at the mill, I would have been quartered. I mean that if I had been a quarter of an hour too late, a half an hour would have been taken off. I only got a penny an hour, and they would have taken a halfpenny. "

Source 10- James Patterson, interviewed by Michael Sadler's Parliamentary Committee, 30th June, 1832.

"I worked at Mr. Braid's Mill at Duntruin. We worked as long as we could see. I could not say at what hour we stopped. There was no clock in the mill. There was nobody but the master and the master's son had a watch and so we did not know the time. The operatives were not permitted to have a watch. There was one man who had a watch but it was taken from him because he told the men the time."

Source 11- Lord Ashley, speech in the House of Commons, 9th May, 1836

Of the thirty-one medical men who were examined, sixteen gave it as their most decided opinion that ten hours is the utmost quantity of labour which can be endured

by the children, with the slightest chance of preserving their health. Dr. Loudon reports, "I am of the opinion no child under fourteen years of age should work in a factory of any description more than eight hours a day." Dr. Hawkins reports, "I am compelled to declare my deliberate opinion, that no child should be employed in factory labour below the age of ten; that no individual, under the age of eighteen, should be engaged in it longer than ten hours daily."

Source 12- Picture of deformed children

Source 13- Table showing the ages of children

Age of workers in cotton mills in Lancashire in 1833		
Age	**Males**	**Females**
under 11	246	155
11 - 16	1,169	1,123
17 - 21	736	1,240
22 - 26	612	780
27 - 31	355	295
32 - 36	215	100
37 - 41	168	81
42 - 46	98	38
47 - 51	88	23
52 - 56	41	4
57 - 61	28	3

Source 14- Dr. Ward from Manchester was interviewed about the health of textile workers on 25th March, 1819.

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 bon e, 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.

Source 15- John Allett started working in a textile factory when he was fourteen years old. Allett was fifty-three when he was interviewed by Michael Sadler and his House of Commons Committee on 21st May, 1832.

Question: Do more accidents take place at the latter end of the day?

Answer: I have known more accidents at the beginning of the day than at the later part. 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.