

CHILD LABOR IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

by Maria Karystineou (B1)

Introductory information:

The Industrial Revolution in the 19th century brought sweeping changes, transforming society from agrarian to industrial. Powered by innovations in machinery and fueled by urbanization, it ushered in mass production, urban growth and economic expansion. Yet, it also brought social upheaval, labor exploitation and environmental degradation.

We will now delve into the various facets of child labor during this historical period, examining its social and ethical dimensions.

During the Victorian era in England, child labor was pervasive, shaping the social landscape of the time. Children as young as five or six were employed in various industries from textile mills to coal mines, facing grueling hours and hazardous working conditions. This era witnessed a rapid industrial revolution, which led to a surge in demand for cheap labor, with children often being the most vulnerable and exploited workforce. Child labor became deeply entrenched in Victorian societies, reflecting both the harsh realities of economic necessity and the widespread neglect of children's rights and welfare.



The consequences of child labor (through children's testimonies):

COMMITTEE: And what time did it come on?

BENTLEY: I was about thirteen years old when it began coming, and it has got worse since. It is five years since my mother died, and my mother was never able to get me a good pair of stays to hold me up, and when my mother died, I had to do for myself, and got me a pair.

C: Were you perfectly straight and healthy before you worked at the mill?

B: Yes, I was as straight a little girl as ever went up and downtown.

C: Were you straight till you were thirteen?

B: Yes, I was.

C: Did your deformity come upon you with much pain and weariness?

B: Yes, I cannot express the pain all the time it was coming.

C: Do you know of anybody that has been similarly injured in their health?

B: Yes, in their health, but not many deformed as I am.

C: Is it very common to have weak ankles and crooked knees?

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B: Yes, very common indeed.

C: Is this brought on by stopping the spindle?

B: Yes.

C: Where are you now?

B: In the poor house.

Elizabeth Bentley in report of Parliamentary committee on the Bill to regulate the Labor of children in mills and factories (1832)

This passage portrays the physical toll on young workers, such as **deformities** and **chronic pain**, caused by long hours. It underscores the abrupt transition from childhood to labor, with **the loss of maternal care** exacerbating the hardships faced. This also reflects the neglect of children's wellbeing and the prioritization of industrial production over human welfare. Moreover, the mention of weak ankles and crooked knees as common afflictions paints a picture of **the enduring physical and emotional scars** the Industrial Revolution caused.



'I have worked down in pit five years; father is working in next pit; I have 12 brothers and sisters — all of them but one live at home; they weave, and wind, and hurry, and one is a counter, one of them can read, none of the rest can, or write; they never went to day-school, but three of them go to Sunday-school; I hurry for my brother John, and come down at seven o'clock about; I go up at six, sometimes seven; I do not like working in pit, but I am obliged to get a living; I work always without stockings, or shoes, or trousers; I wear nothing but my chemise; I have to go up to the headings with the men; they are all naked there; I am got well used to that, and don't care now much about it; I was afraid at first, and did not like it; they never behave rudely to me; I cannot read or write.'

Mary Barrett aged 14. June 15 (Lord Ashley's Mines Commission Report (1842). From the minutes of the parliament)

The interviewee, a young girl, describes her family's dire circumstances, with her father and siblings also toiling in the mines to make ends meet. Despite having a large family, **educational opportunities are scarce**, with only a few attending Sunday-school. The girl's experience is marked by **deprivation** and **danger**, as she described laboring without proper clothing or protection. **The normalization of nudity** reflects the desensitization to harsh conditions and the acceptance of exploitation as a means of survival. The passage highlights the cycle of poverty, the lack of education.



'It does not tire me, but I have to trap without a light and I'm scared. I go at four and sometimes half past three in the morning, and come out at five and half past. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don't like being in the pit. I am very sleepy when I go sometimes in the morning. I go to Sunday-schools and read Reading made Easy. She knows her letters, and can read little words. They teach me to pray. She repeated the Lord's Prayer, not very perfectly, and ran on with the following addition: "God bless my father and mother, and sister and brother, uncles and aunts and cousins, and everybody else, and God bless me and make me a good servant. Amen." I have heard tell of Jesus many a time. I don't know why he came on earth, I'm sure, and I don't know why he died, but he had stones for his head to rest on. I would like to be at school far better than in the pit.'

Sarah Gooder aged 8 years (Lord Ashley's Mines Commission Report (1842). From the minutes of the parliament)

What is said provides insight into the life of a young child laborer, highlighting **the frightening conditions** they faced while working in the **dark and damp coalmines**. Apart from the **fear** and **exhaustion**, the child expresses **a longing for education** and **a better life outside the pit**. The attendance at school demonstrates **a desire for knowledge** and spiritual guidance even amidst the reality of their daily existence. The child's **incomplete understanding of religious teachings**, such as Jesus's purpose on Earth, reflects the limited education and exposure to broader concepts outside of their immediate environment. The physical and emotional toll of child labor as well as **the yearning for a brighter future** beyond the confines of the mine.

'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.'

Isabella Read, 12 years old, coal-bearer (Lord Ashley's Mines Commission Report (1842). From the minutes of the parliament)

This testimony vividly depicts the **physical strain and discomfort** experienced by this child laborer. The burden of carrying heavy loads on their backs, combined with constant stooping and wading through water. The mention of **falling asleep from exhaustion** highlights the extreme fatigue endured by the workers, further exacerbated by **the oppressive heat and poor ventilation in the mines**. The reference to being 'made to like it' serves a poignant of **the urgent need for reform to protect their health and wellbeing**.

Sources:

<https://victorianweb.org/history/ashley.html>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_era

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