

Industrial Revolution Primary Sources

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Focus Question: What was life like for workers in the early Industrial Revolution?

Source #1 Chadwick's Report on Sanitary Conditions

Edwin Chadwick (1800-1890) had taken an active part in the reform of the [Poor Law](#) and in factory legislation before he became secretary to a commission investigating sanitary conditions and means of improving them. The Commission's report, of which the summary is given below, is the third of the great reports of this epoch. The following material comes from Report...from the Poor Law Commissioners on an Inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain [\[online source\]](#). London, 1842, pp. 369-372.]

“That the various forms of epidemic, endemic, and other disease caused, or aggravated, or propagated chiefly amongst the labouring classes by atmospheric impurities produced by decomposing animal and vegetable substances, by damp and filth, and close and overcrowded dwellings prevail amongst the population in every part of the kingdom, whether dwelling in separate houses, in rural villages, in small towns, in the larger towns — as they have been found to prevail in the lowest districts of the metropolis.

That such disease, wherever its attacks are frequent, is always found in connexion with the physical circumstances above specified, and that where those circumstances are removed by drainage, proper cleansing, better ventilation, and other means of diminishing atmospheric impurity, the frequency and intensity of such disease is abated; and where the removal of the noxious agencies appears to be complete, such disease almost entirely disappears.”

Source #2 The Physical Deterioration of the Textile Workers

John Fielden, although himself a Lancashire factory owner, was one of the staunchest fighters for protective legislation for the cotton worker.

“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.”

[P. Gaskell, *The Manufacturing Population of England*. London, 1833, pp.161-162, 202-203.]

Source #3: Evidence Given Before the Sadler Committee

In 1832 Michael Sadler secured a [parliamentary](#) investigation of conditions in the [textile factories](#) and he sat as chairman on the committee. The evidence printed here is taken from the large body published in the committee's report and is representative rather than exceptional. It will be observed that the questions are frequently leading; this reflects Sadler's knowledge of the sort of information that the committee were to hear and his purpose of bringing it out. This report stands out as one of three great reports on the life of the industrial class — the two others being that of the Ashley Commission on the mines and 's report on sanitary problems. The immediate effect of the investigation and the report was the passage of the Act of 1833 limiting hours of [employment](#) for women and [children](#) in textile work.

Joshua Drake, called in; and Examined.

“Q: You say you would prefer moderate labour and lower wages; are you pretty comfortable upon your present wages?

A: I have no wages, but two days a week at present; but when I am working at some jobs we can make a little, and at others we do very poorly.

Q: When a child gets [3s.](#) a week, does that go much towards its subsistence?

A: No, it will not keep it as it should do.

Q: When they got 6s. or 7s. when they were pieceners, if they reduced the hours of labor, would they not get less?

A: They would get a halfpenny a day less, but I would rather have less wages and less work.

Q: Do you receive any parish assistance?

A: No.

Q: Why do you allow your children to go to work at those places where they are ill-treated or over-worked?

A: Necessity compels a man that has children to let them work.

Q: Then you would not allow your children to go to those factories under the present system, if it was not from necessity?

A: No.

Q: Supposing there was a law passed to limit the hours of labour to eight hours a day, or something of that sort, of course you are aware that a manufacturer could not afford to pay them the same wages?

A: No, I do not suppose that they would, but at the same time I would rather have it, and I believe that it would bring me into employ; and if I lost 5d. a day from my children's work, and I got half-a-crown myself, it would be better.

Q: How would it get you into employ?

A: By finding more employment at the machines, and work being more regularly spread abroad, and divided amongst the people at large. One man is now regularly turned off into the street, whilst another man is running day and night.

Q: You mean to say, that if the manufacturers were to limit the hours of labour, they would employ more people?

A: Yes.

[[Parliamentary Papers](#), 1831-1832, vol. XV. pp. 44, 95-97, 115, 195, 197, 339, 341-342.]