

Working Conditions and Wages

Until about 1750, most people in Britain lived in small villages and farmed, raised animals, or worked as craftspeople. Farming families also spun wool or wove cloth in their homes to sell at the market. Men, women, and children worked hard every day of the week from morning until night, but most still struggled to earn a living.

As the Industrial Revolution developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more and more people moved away from their villages to work in mines and textile factories. A common working day in a factory was 12 to 14 hours long, with short breaks for meals. Workers labored six days a week in 80-degree heat with machinery that needed constant attention. Overseers (managers) fined workers or threatened to fire them if they were not paying close attention to their work at all times. The factories were extremely dirty and dangerous, with low ceilings, locked windows and doors, and poor lighting. Workers risked losing limbs from loud, unguarded machines or getting serious throat or lung infections from the hot, polluted factory air.

A prominent nineteenth-century writer, Charles Dickens, describes the rhythm of life for the factory workers in his book *Hard Times*:

[They were] all equally like one another. All went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavement, to do the same work to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of last and the next.

Employers paid low wages and would reduce them if workers were late or business was bad. Some factory owners paid their employees with vouchers for goods at their own stores, where they kept prices very high. Below is a breakdown of the wages paid to workers in the 1780s.



men
10 to 15 shillings
per week



women
5 shillings
per week



children
1 shilling
per week

(In the early 1800s, one pound of tea cost 6 shillings, and rent cost 5 shillings a month.)

THE HISTORY OF THE ...

Until about 1750, most people in Britain lived in rural areas...

The population was small and the economy was based on agriculture...

There was little trade between different parts of the country...

Most people worked the land and supported their families...

The social structure was simple and based on local customs...

There was no large-scale industry or manufacturing...

The government was weak and local lords held most power...

There was no national identity and people were loyal to their lords...

The church was the main source of education and moral teaching...

There was no large-scale urban population...

The economy was slow and growth was minimal...

There was no significant technological progress...

The society was largely illiterate and uneducated...

There was no sense of national unity or shared destiny...

The world was seen as a collection of separate, isolated communities...

There was no concept of a global world...

The future was uncertain and the present was often bleak...

There was no hope for a better future...

The world was a place of suffering and hardship...

There was no sense of progress or improvement...

The world was a place of constant struggle...

There was no sense of purpose or meaning...

The world was a place of despair and hopelessness...

There was no sense of a higher power or divine intervention...

The world was a place of darkness and gloom...

There was no light at the end of the tunnel...

The world was a place of endless suffering...

Child Labor

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution in England in the mid 1700s, children shifted from working on farms or in the home to working in textile factories, brick yards, and coal mines. Once children began working in the factories, parents could no longer watch over them as they had previously when they worked on farms. Poor families could not afford enough food to keep their children healthy, so children had weaker bodies and were more likely to get sick from the dusty air or become deformed from accidents with machines. Factory owners paid children extremely low wages—10 percent of adult males' wages—for long hours and often difficult work.

As concerns about the welfare of children rose in the mid 1800s, Parliament (the English government legislature) held investigations to find out the conditions of children workers. Below is an interview between a parliamentary investigator and factory worker Elizabeth Bentley about her experiences:

What time did you begin to work at a factory? *When I was six years old.*

What was your business in that mill? *I was a little doffer [worker who changes the bobbins on the frames in the spinning machines].*

What were your usual hours of labor in that mill? *From 6 in the morning till 7 at night.*

What time was allowed for your meals? *Forty minutes at noon.*

Had you any time to get your breakfast or drinking? *No, we got it as we could.*

Do you consider doffing a laborious [hard, tiring] employment? *Yes.*

Does [your work] keep you constantly on your feet? *Yes, there are so many frames, and they run so quick.*

Your labor is very excessive? *Yes; you have not time for anything.*

Suppose you flagged [slowed down] a little, or were too late, what would they do? *Strap [beat] us.*

Are they in the habit of strapping those who are last in doffing? *Yes.*

Constantly? *Yes.*

Girls as well as boys? *Yes.*

Have you ever been strapped? *Yes.*

Severely? *Yes.*

Could you eat your food well in that factory? *No, indeed, I had not much to eat, and the little I had I could not eat it, my appetite was so poor, and being covered with dust; and it was no use to take it home, I could not eat it, and the overlooker took it, and gave it to the pigs.*

#3

Changing Role of Women

Before the industrial era, most women in Britain worked with men on farms and in domestic (home) industries. Women usually managed the dairy, gardens, orchards, and farm animals. They were also primarily responsible for raising children and running the household.

During the Industrial Revolution, many women moved with their families to urban areas and began to work in textile (cloth) mills and other factories. The shift to work in the factories meant women spent long hours away from their children and could only do the housework after 12 to 14 hours of labor outside the home. Women and men no longer worked together as partners, and there was little time to spend with children.

Working conditions in the factories were hazardous. Lace workers wore wooden rods along their backs to support them during the long hours they bent over their work, resulting in deformed ribs and chests. This made women more susceptible (at risk) to lung disease, which also plagued textile factory workers, who breathed the stuffy, dusty air in the mills. Women's long skirts and hair made them more likely to be caught in the machinery and crippled.

Many women worked as domestic (household) servants in the homes of wealthy people. Single women left their homes to serve as cooks, maids, and nurses for children. By the late 1800s, one third of all women employed outside of their homes were domestic workers.

Women were paid one-half to one-third of men's wages, making 5 shillings a week when men made 10 to 15 in 1780. Women had few rights, and most of their earnings by law had to be given to their fathers or husbands. Many factory owners preferred to hire women because they were cheaper employees and more submissive (obedient) since they needed their wages to support children at home. Women were preferred as household workers because it was considered better for women than men to work with children.

#4

Conditions in the Coal Mines

Coal mining was common in England by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Coal was used in place of wood for fueling stoves in the manufacture of bricks, dyes, glass, and other products, and in heating homes. After the steam engine was invented, more coal was needed to heat the water into steam, so more mines were dug deeper into the ground. More workers were also needed to fulfill the rising demand for coal. In 1750 British workers mined 5,000,000 tons of coal. By 1830 miners were producing 23,000,000 tons.

Men, women, and children worked in the mines, and sometimes whole families would work together. Mine workers labored half-naked in the hot underground tunnels cutting coal by hand and dragging it up to the surface. Women and children often had to crawl through narrow underground passages—some as low as 16 to 18 inches in height—pulling coal carts for 10 to 20 miles a day. The mines were damp and dark, and workers risked lung diseases from breathing air full of coal dust. Betty Harris, a “drawer” who pulled a coal cart through the mine passages, described her work:

I have a belt around my waist, and a chain passing between my legs, and I go on my hands and feet. The road is very steep, and we have to hold by a rope; and when there is no rope, by anything we can catch hold of. There are six women and about six boys and girls in the pit I work in; it is very hard work for a woman. The pit is very wet where I work, and the water comes over our clog-tops always, and I have seen it up to my thighs; it rains in at the roof terribly. My clothes are wet through almost all day long.

Workers in the **coal mines** had to face the dangers of drowning from underground floods and **suffocation** from poisonous gases. Frequent explosions were caused when the candle flames miners used to find their way through the mine met **with** explosive **marsh** gas. Before 1810, when wooden props were made to support tunnel roofs, cave-ins were also common.

Coalminers in the Coal Mine

The coalminers in the coal mine were a hardworking and dedicated group of men who spent their lives underground. They were responsible for extracting coal from the earth, a task that was both dangerous and physically demanding. The miners worked in dark, confined spaces, often in the presence of heavy machinery and the constant threat of accidents. Despite the challenges, they persevered, knowing that their labor was essential for the energy needs of the nation. The coalminers' lives were a testament to the strength and resilience of the working class.

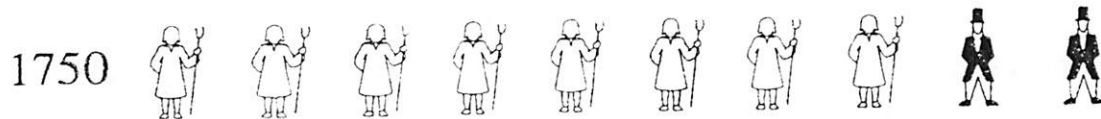
The coalminers' work was not without its dangers. Accidents were a common occurrence, often resulting in the loss of life or limb. The miners had to be constantly vigilant, as a single mistake could have catastrophic consequences. The underground environment was filled with hazards, from falling rocks to gas leaks. The miners' families often lived in small, crowded communities near the mines, where they could be quickly alerted in case of an emergency.

The coalminers' lives were a cycle of hard work and sacrifice. They were the backbone of the coal industry, providing the fuel that powered the nation's economy. Their contributions were often overlooked, but their struggles and achievements are a vital part of American history. The coalminers' story is one of perseverance, courage, and the enduring spirit of the working class.

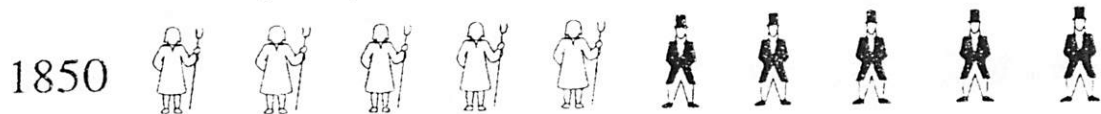
Urbanization

In the mid 1700s, more than half of the population in Britain lived and worked on farms. Between 1750 and 1851, the population increased dramatically. At the same time, the enclosure of open fields into compact farms displaced many small farming families. These families often moved to towns to find work in factories and workshops.

As industry grew, more people moved into urban areas, creating huge population increases in the cities. The figures on the change in the rural and urban populations are as follows:



8 out of every 10 English people lived in the country.



5 out of every 10 English people lived in the country.

Factory owners rushed to build workers' housing, which was dark, poorly constructed, and badly ventilated. Houses were built back to back in long rows, and people lived in cramped conditions. Poor families had only a basement or an outhouse to sleep in, and orphans and the unemployed were forced to live on the street. Twenty families shared one toilet and water pump. Without proper sewers or trash collection, garbage littered the streets, so diseases like typhoid, measles, and cholera spread quickly. Crime was also a persistent problem since there was no official police force.

Extremely hard work, combined with the harsh living conditions of the workers in the cities, led to much shorter life expectancy for city-dwellers, as can be seen below:



In 1842 a farmer in a rural area could expect to live 38 years.



In 1842 a worker in the city of Manchester could expect to live only 17 years.