

Child Labour

Many factory workers were children. They worked long hours and were often treated badly by the supervisors or overseers. Sometimes the children started work as young as four or five years old. A young child could not earn much, but even a few pence would be enough to buy food

Children were often forced to work almost as soon as they could walk. This was not something new to the Victorian period as children had always been expected to work for hundreds of years. Many were used as cheap labour.

- Children worked very long hours with little breaks and no fresh air.
- They often worked in very dangerous conditions resulting in injuries or even death.
 - Very young children were expected to work
- There was no education for the poor, so it was very unlikely they could get better paid jobs when they were older.
 - Children were paid very little because they were younger

Most children had no choice – they needed to work to help their families earn enough money to live.

Living

The worker's houses were usually near to the factories so that people could walk to work. They were built really quickly and cheaply. The houses were cheap, most had between 2–4 rooms – one or two rooms downstairs, and one or two rooms upstairs. Victorian families were big with 4 or 5 children.

There was no running water or toilet. A whole street would have to share an outdoor pump and a couple of outside toilets. Most houses in the North of England were "back to backs" (built in double rows) with no windows at the front, no backyards and a sewer down the middle of the street. The houses were built crammed close together, with very narrow streets between them. Most of the houses were crowded with five or more people possibly crammed into a single room. Even the cellars were full.

Most of the new towns were dirty and unhealthy. The household rubbish was thrown out into the streets. Housing conditions like these were a perfect breeding grounds for diseases. More than 31,000 people died during an outbreak of cholera in 1832 and lots more were killed by typhus, smallpox and dysentery.

Coal Mines

The coal mines were dangerous places where roofs sometimes caved in, explosions happened and workers got all sorts of injuries. There were very few safety rules. Cutting and moving coal which machines do nowadays was done by men, women and children.

The younger children often worked as "*trappers*" who worked trap doors. They sat in a hole hollowed out for them and held a string which was fastened to the door. When they heard the coal wagons coming they had to open the door by pulling a string. This job was one of the easiest down the mine but it was very lonely and the place where they sat was usually damp and draughty.

Older children might be employed as "*coal bearers*" carrying loads of coal on their backs in big baskets.

The Mines Act was passed by the Government in 1842 forbidding the employment of women and girls and all boys under the age of ten down mines. Later it became illegal for a boy under 12 to work down a mine.

Mills

While thousands of children worked down the mine, thousands of others worked in the cotton mills. The mill owners often took in orphans to their workhouses, they lived at the mill and were worked as hard as possible.

They spent most of their working hours at the machines with little time for fresh air or exercise. Even part of Sunday was spent cleaning machines. There were some serious accidents, some children were scalped when their hair was caught in the machine, hands were crushed and some children were killed when they went to sleep and fell into the machine.

Other Jobs

Although in 1832 the use of boys for sweeping chimneys was forbidden by law, boys continued to be forced through the narrow winding passages of chimneys in large houses. When they first started at between five and ten years old, children suffered many cuts, grazes and bruises on their knees, elbows and thighs however after months of suffering their skin became hardened.

Street Children

Hordes of dirty, ragged children roamed the streets with no regular money and no home to go to. The children of the streets were often orphans with no-one to care for them. They stole or picked pockets to buy food and slept in outhouses or doorways. Charles Dickens wrote about these children in his book "Oliver Twist".

Some street children did jobs to earn money. They could work as crossing-sweepers, sweeping a way through the mud and horse dung of the main paths to make way for ladies and gentlemen. Others sold lace, flowers, matches or muffins etc out in the streets.

Change

It took time for the government to decide that working children ought to be protected by laws as many people did not see anything wrong with the idea of children earning their keep. They also believed that people should be left alone to help themselves and not expect others to protect or keep them. They felt children had a right to send their children out to work. People such as Lord Shaftesbury and Sir Robert Peel worked hard to persuade the public that it was wrong for children to suffer health problems and to miss out on schooling due to work.