

Effect of the 19th century on children



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How did the lives of children change during the 19th century?

Until the start of the industrial revolution, children were seen as small adults with few rights of their own. By the end of the nineteenth century childhood was a very different experience. The following essay will explore how this change came about.

Children of the poorer classes had been part of the labour force for centuries, but with the rise of the factories, their work conditions changed. Children made up 'two-thirds of the workforce on powered equipment in 143 water mills in England and Scotland' ^[1] Conditions in factories were harsh, discipline strict and sometimes cruel, and hours were long. A mill worker is quoted in the Parliamentary Committee of 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...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. ^[2]

In 1833 the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children reported many instances of children being strapped or hit, often because a child had fallen asleep towards the end of a fourteen hour day. ^[3]

The Government tried to enforce some age restrictions in the early 1800s, but they were mainly ineffective because of the difficulty in proving children's ages. ^[4] In the 1830s factory owners argued that the reduction of hours would result in higher prices, but in 1833 the *Althorp's Factory Act* reduced working hours further, and by 1847 the ten-hour day was in place.

In 1842 the Royal Commission carried out a Mines Report that revealed horrific conditions:

I'm a trapper in the Gawber pit. 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.

Sarah Gooder, aged 8 [5]

Lord Ashley (later Shaftesbury) pointed out that in Wales ' it is not unusual to take them into the pits at 4 years' [6]

The use of ' climbing boys' for cleaning chimney flues was also horrifying. There were reports of horrendous burning or suffocation accidents, sometimes fatal. Campaigners against this practice included Charles Dickens, and Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* created further awareness, and it was a year after its serialised publication that the use of children for chimney cleaning was banned. [7]

However, census returns show that child labour did not reduce significantly until at least the 1880s. The figures for boys working in mines show that there was no decline in figures until 1881 when the figures decreased from 36, 000 in 1871 to 26, 000. [8]

The reason why so many families put their children to work was due to poverty. Henry Mayhew was told in 1851: ' My little girl began about six...

She never goes to school. We can't spare her.' [9] The growth of the population in the cities and towns, plus the immigration of the Irish during the potato famine, and further immigration from Africa and Asia, had led to massive overcrowding and hardship, and the existing Poor Law legislation was no longer effective. Children growing up in urban slums were surrounded by dirt and disease, and infant mortality rates were high. Reports from people such as Edwin Chadwick and Henry Mayhew illustrated the squalor of living conditions for the working classes in the cities. The evangelical reformer, Lord Shaftesbury, witnessed the conditions when he visited London's slums in 1846 and was struck by:

...the children, whom he described as a race of beings apparently unknown to the outside world: nondescript, unknown, uncared for, begging on street corners, squatting on doorsteps, wading in the gutters. Some had no home. Some had no name.' [10]

In these conditions children inevitably turned to crime or prostitution and when caught were punished as adults. [11] Some children might be deported to Australia, where the growing Empire colonies needed extra labour.

Social reformers such as Mary Carpenter had some influence in changing the treatment of child criminals, and growing public awareness led to an increase in charities and orphanages. Improved welfare legislation and the new opportunities for education in the 1870s did much to improve the situation. [12]

The introduction of state education in 1870 created the most effective change for the lives of working and poor children. Previously the only schooling provision had been Dame Schools, Sunday Schools or Charity Schools, but children who went to these schools rarely received more than the basic three 'Rs'. In many areas there was no school provision at all. [13] Without income protection, wealthier families could fall victim to hard times. John Shinn, whose father fell ill and could not afford to send him to school, said: 'The greatest and most serious misfortune of my life has been the loss of schooling or education' [14]

There was some debate on whether the education of the labouring classes would improve or damage society, but reformers such as the philosopher, John Stuart Mill, argued that knowledge produces understanding and sensible behaviour. [15] The extension of the vote to working class men in 1867 caused a greater awareness of the importance of education. However, there was still a *laissez-faire* argument that the state had no right to be involved in education.

The 1870 Education Act did not make schooling compulsory, or free. However, compulsory education was in place by the end of the 1870s, and the age for this rose over the next few decades until by the mid-twentieth century education was compulsory until the age of 16.

With education and fewer working hours, leisure time improved. As literacy increased, so did the availability of books and magazines for children. By 1900 clubs and youth movements had been set up to provide entertainment

- and to ensure that youngsters with time on their hands did not get into trouble. [16]

For children of the middle and upper classes, life was different. Not required to earn an income, most children received regular education, either at home or at a private school. However, educational provision for girls was usually poor or non-existent, and the prevailing attitude was that girls were of less importance. Molly Hughes, the daughter of a stockbroker said:

I was never taken to anything more exciting than a picture gallery, not even to a pantomime at Christmas...My father's slogan was that boys should go everywhere and know everything, and that a girl should stay at home and know nothing. [17]

Due to the campaigns concerning equal rights for women, girls' education improved considerably during the century, with schools and colleges being set up in the 1850s, and university education from the 1870s.

Looking back to his childhood in the 1840s, Charles Shaw wrote in 1893:

I wonder whether it is true that I was allowed to be worked for fourteen hours a day when a little over seven years of age...whether it is true that even poor children now receive a better education than...Tom Hughes;... if the rags, and squalor, and severe labour and long hours of those days, as contrasted with the leisure, and plenty, and recreation of these days are all illusions?

[18]

This quote illustrates the changes for some children over the course of the century. Children were now regarded as a separate entity to be protected and cared for. They were no longer 'mini-adults' to be used as another source of income, or left to roam the streets as orphans. Childhood, as a separate experience to adulthood, had been created.

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Footnotes

[1] Galbi, Douglas A., ' Child Labour and the Division of Labour in the Early English Cotton Mills', 1994

[2] quoted in www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/IRtime.htm

[3] Taylor, D, *Mastering Economic and Social History*, Macmillan, pp. 196-7

[4] *ibid* . p. 200

[5] quoted in www.victorianweb.org/history/ashley.html

[6] Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, July 7, 1842, in Turrall, p. 294

[7] Wilson, A. N., *The Victorians*, Arrow, p. 295-299

[8] Best, G., *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-1875*, Fontana, pp. 130-1

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[9] quoted in Steinbach, Susie, *Women in England 1760-1914* , p. 166

[10] Duckworth, Jeannie, *Fagin's Children: Criminal Children in Victorian England* , p. 3

[11] *ibid* , p. 6

[12] *ibid* , pp. 135-6

[13] Taylor, pp. 278-9

[14] Burnett, John, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s* , Penguin, p. 136

[15] Golby, J. M. (Ed), *Culture and Society in Britain 1850-1890* , OUP, p. 136

[16] Horn Pamela, *The Victorian Town Child*, pp153-179

[17] Horn, p. 20

[18] Avery, Gillian, *The Echoing Green: Memories of Regency and Victorian Youth* , p. 117