

# Observations on the conditions of the working class during the industrial revolut...

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Observations on the Conditions of the Working Class During the Industrial Revolution The British Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought about a much needed change in the economic structure of the country. The old fashioned, agricultural based economy that Britain had assumed for centuries had become obsolete, and in the spirit of mercantilism and neighborly competition with the French, the English made the drastic change to a manufacturing based economy (Owen, p. 50). This transformation allowed for the emergence of large, manufacturing based cities, an abundance of English manufactured goods, and made Britain, overall, a very wealthy nation. These byproducts of the Industrial Revolution allowed Britain to make great economic strides, but those that put in the hours at the factories that made such a revolution possible gained almost nothing for their treacherous work. The working class of the Industrial Revolution lived hard, laborious lives.

The majority of their time was spent in the factories, which were very often unsanitary, overcrowded, and hazardous, and when they were able to leave the factory and spend time at home, they were met with equally horrid conditions. Although these people and their work were undoubtedly one of the largest factors towards the successfulness of the Industrial Revolution, they themselves suffered greatly, and reaped nearly no benefits for their work. The overall quality of their lives was incredibly poor. Every arena of their lives, from working conditions and home life, to nutrition and cleanliness, was effected by overwhelming poverty.

The urban environment that was thought to be a way out of poverty became a mechanism in which poverty was able to flourish. The life of a working class family during the Industrial Revolution was very much dictated by the factory in which they worked. Employees would spend nearly all day in these horrid environments; most would start their day around five o'clock in the morning, and with the exception of two short breaks for meals, would remain in the factory until eight o'clock at night or later (Kay, p. 155). The factories were dingy, brightly lit buildings that housed far too many people at a time.

They were consumed with dust and filaments of cotton, and contaminated the surrounding areas with smoke. They were filled with heat and filth, and contained large, dangerous machines that were often operated by children (Aikin, p. 148). Seven and eight year old children were often sent by their parents to work in the factories, and while there they were treated as adults. Robert Owen noted that the manner in which the young employees were dealt with was responsible for an uneducated and emotionally unstable generation of children. He referred to the children as "weak in bodily and mental faculties." (Owen, p. 50-1).

The young employees were indeed as horribly unfortunate as Owen described, but upon realizing the conditions they were working in, one can easily see why. The machines in which the children operated were massive and intimidating apparatuses. Cotton mills used spinning machines that were able to hold thousands of spindles at a time, and moved rapidly and forcefully (Aikin, p. 148). Adolescent employees were required to work unreasonably long hours with these machines, for few cared how truly ill-

suited the work was for children. The home life of working class families was equally as horrible as their occupations.

James Kay wrote in his essay on "The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes in Manchester" that these families lived in "ill-furnished, uncleanly, often ill-ventilated, perhaps damp" homes that were consumed in "absolute filth." (Kay, p. 156). These dwellings were lumped together in communities, only perpetuating uncleanliness and disease, and were representative of the mindsets and attitudes of the people living in them. Kay noted that entire families would often sleep in a single bed and use "a heap of filthy straw and covering of old sacking" as bedding. He observed that the "houses of the poor . . . are too generally built back to back, having therefore only one outlet, no yard, no privy, and no receptacle for refuse." (Kay, p. 156-7). Essentially, what Kay observed about the working class of Manchester was the overwhelming level of poverty that consumed it. The people that lived in these types of dwellings were incredibly poor, and had no way of relieving themselves from the crushing poverty all around them.

The lives of the working class peoples were reduced to that of animals; they were practically owned by their employers, who never gave them the freedom to better their lives. These people were not inherently ignorant or sub-human, their living conditions were direct products of cruel treatment and outright disregard for them as human beings. Through processes such as workplace advancement, education, or even cleaner living arrangements, the working class would have had a much more plentiful and human-like existence, but they were never given the opportunity to do so. This

phenomenon of belittlement was not restricted to the living arrangements; it perpetuated into every area of people's lives. The typical diet consisted of one true meal a day, which was neither healthy nor substantial.

Breakfast usually consisted of a simple cup of tea that was "most always of a bad, and sometimes of a deleterious quality" (Kay, p. 155). Dinner was the only meal of any true substance, and even it only consisted of boiled potatoes and bacon with melted lard and butter (Kay, p. 155). People with this type of diet were understandably malnourished, and with the combination of poor living and working conditions, they very seldom were in good health. Children often felt the brute force of such an extreme poverty more so than adults, and were "ill-fed, dirty, ill-clothed, exposed to cold and neglect. So much so in fact, that over fifty percent of children living in these conditions died before the age of five (Kay, p. 157).

Crushing poverty often affects people on an emotional level, and this was very much the case during the Industrial Revolution. Frederick Engels compared the mindset of the workers to slaves, by asserting that the only difference between the two is that the old-fashioned slave was openly recognized as a slave, while the urban factory worker was disguised as a free man (Engels, p. 63). Monotonous labor and a life similar to that of a slave drained the emotions of the working class. Urban life created stone cold and despair ridden replicas of once proud men, loving wives, and innocent children. Factory workers participated in "habits generally destructive to their own comforts, [and] of the well-being of those around them" out of

pure necessity, but perhaps without full knowledge of the consequences (Owen, p. 151).

Kay compares the toil of the people to King Sisyphus, suggesting that the difficult labor that the factory workers frequently performed was just as in vain as Sisyphus' endless struggle with his boulder (Kay, p. 155). The tasks required of the poor seemed just as endless to them as it did for Sisyphus, for neither could see an end in sight. The areas in which these people lived became places of crime, caused by the emotional distress of poverty, and were "inhabited by a turbulent population" (Kay, p. 157).

The people became slothful and benevolent, hateful towards outsiders and immigrants from Ireland, and allowed the unpleasantness around them consume them (Kay, p. 154, 7). The working class of the Industrial Revolution lived in absolutely horrid conditions. They lived in poverty and filth, they spent their "superfluous gains on debauchery," and were treated by the upper classes as if they were animals (Kay, p. 155). They lived short lives filled with work, disease and sorrow, with no way out except for death.