

# Changing the living and working ways set Britain as a global power: the industrial...

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



The British Industrial Revolution (1770-1850) changed the social and economic life of Britain. It established a completely new way of living and working. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, Britain was poor, though not without some economic surplus; relatively stagnant, though not completely static; and based on agriculture as its main economic activity (Deane 18). Because of the use of new food crops, such as the potato, and a decline in epidemic diseases, many of the major countries, including Britain, experienced tremendous population growth during this time. The population growth demanded the production of more goods, which soon brought about the development of factories. The technological advancements led to a new model of production and social relationships. The cottage workers were rapidly induced to long work hours in the large brick factories which resembled the stone poorhouses. Eventually, the cottage workers became unwilling to work in the factories which caused factory and mill owners to focus on abandoned and pauper children as their labor supply. These children were infants to 16 years old, averaging 4 feet 11 inches or less, and working 13 or 14 hours a day, six days a week (Spartacus). Child labor during this time became a significant topic for reformers, supporters, parents, children and the government.

During the Industrial Revolution, there were many factory reformers who were against using child labor. John Fielden was born in Todmorden to Joshua Fielden, owner of a small textile business. From an early age, he had been taught to be concerned about the wellbeing and safety of employees of the company. In 1816, he and his brothers petitioned Parliament for factory legislation that protected child workers. Fielden founded a religious social

reform group called the Todmorden Unitarian Society in 1822. He also advocated the introduction of a minimum wage and believed long work hours had a severe effect on workers health.

Other reformers, such as Robert Owen, were against child labor for children under the age of ten. Robert Owens thought that it was injurious to children under ten to be working in the factories, and that it was not beneficial to the proprietors. Owens witnessed the unsatisfactory working conditions in one of the factories at New Lanark and, as a result, adopted regulations to put an end to such an injurious system. He toured the country making speeches, hoping to encourage other factory workers to treat their child workers as he did. In his speeches, Owens argued that he was creating a “ new moral world, a world from which the bitterness of divisive sectarian religion would be banished” (Spartacus).

While there were many who were against child labor during this time, there were also those who were loyal supporters. Edward Baines, the son of Edward Baines, was born in 1800. Edward Baines was the editor and sole proprietor of the newspaper, The Leeds Mercury. Although he strongly disapproved of slave trade, he was totally opposed to factory legislation. He favored some aspects of parliamentary reform, but did not feel the working class should be given the vote. In 1835, Baines wrote the book History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain which criticized those who were against child labor for over-exaggerating what life was like in the textile factories. He claimed that many of the children were born in bad health and “ sink under factory labor, as they would under any kind of labor” (Spartacus).

Samuel Greg was also a supporter of child labor. Greg was born into a wealthy family in Belfast in 1758. He was a textile merchant who owned the Quarry Bank Mill. In 1790, Samuel Greg became convinced that the answer to his labor problem was to build an apprentice house and purchase children from workhouses. These children came from Wilmslow and Macclesfield, and as far as Liverpool and London. Children made up 50% of his total workforce (Spartacus).

Because many parents would not allow their children to work in the factories, many factory owners resulted to buying children from orphanages and workhouses. These children would sign contracts, which made them the property of the factory owners and bound them to work until the age of 21. Pauper apprentices were cheaper to house than adult workers. By the late 1790s, about 1/3 of the workers in the cotton industry were pauper apprentices (Spartacus).

One of the major complaints was the state of the factories the children worked in. A report published in July 1833 stated that most factories were “dirty; low-roofed; ill-ventilated; ill-drained; no conveniences for washing or dressing; no contrivance for carrying off dust and other effluvia” (Spartacus). Children were going from a building with temperatures of 70 or 80 degrees and up out to damp cold air causing inflammation of the lungs. Because of inhaling dust from flax and flue from cotton, children developed what became known as mill fever. The pollution in the atmosphere was a major factor in the high incidence of tuberculosis, bronchitis, asthma, and byssinosis among cotton workers (Spartacus).

Many of the younger children were employed as scavengers and piecers. Scavengers had the dangerous task of picking up the loose cotton from under the machinery while the machine was still working. Many accidents occurred and many children had their hair literally torn from their heads. Piecers would lean over the spinning-machine to piece broken threads. This stressful task involved continual friction of the hand in rubbing the piecing upon the coarse wrapper wearing off the skin, and causing the fingers to bleed. Piecers had to stand with the right foot forward during the day, with his hands, feet, and eyes constantly in motion. The chief weight of his body rested upon his right knee, which is almost always the first joint to give way (Spartacus).

Born into a poor family living in Kendal, William Dodd was sent to work as a card-maker at the age of five. By the time he was six years old, he was employed in a local textile factory as a piecer. Dodd recalls those times: I have frequently worked at the frame till I could scarcely get home, and in this state have been stopped by people in the streets who noticed me shuffling along, and advised me to work no more in the factories; but I was not my own master. During the day, I frequently counted the clock, and calculated how many hours I had still to remain at work; my evenings were spent in preparing for the following day - in rubbing my knees, ankles, elbows, and wrists with oil, etc. I went to bed, to cry myself to sleep, and pray that the Lord would take me to himself before morning. Within a few years as a piecer, Dodd was a cripple (Spartacus). Edward Baines, owner of The Leeds Mercury, said, It is not true to represent the work of piecers and

scavengers as continually straining. None of the work in which children and young persons are engaged in mills requires constant attention. It is scarcely possible for any employment to be lighter. The position of the body is not injurious: the children walk about, and have the opportunity of frequently sitting if they are so disposed.

Michael Sadler, chairman of the parliamentary committee which sought to expose the horrid factory conditions, interviewed doctors who had experience treating people who worked in textile factories. Several of the doctors expressed concern about the vast number of textile workers who suffered from physical deformities. A doctor in Leeds, Sir Samuel Smith, described the work in factories and mills as being far from light and easy because of the labor being performed in a standing position. He saw many cases in which childrens soft bones had been bent and the knees were weak and turned inwards. There were even cases where individuals lost 12 inches of height because of the conditions (Spartacus).

Much of the dangerous work in the factories brought about many accidents. A report commissioned by the House of Commons in 1832 said that: " there are factories, no means few in number, nor confined to the smaller mills, in which serious accidents are continually occurring, and in which, notwithstanding, dangerous parts of the machinery are allowed to remain unfenced" (Spartacus). One of the hospitals reported that each year almost one thousand people are treated for factory machine-related wounds and mutilations. These workers were not compensated for their injuries or provided medical assistance. Dr. Michael Ward of Manchester saw many

children admitted into his infirmary whose hands and arms had been caught in machinery. Many times the muscles and skin had been stripped down to the bone and sometimes there would be a finger or two missing. Nearly half the children employed in the factories had received injuries from the machines (Spartacus).

There were times when the hazardous work became tiresome for the children and they could no longer work at the required speed. The children were then beaten with a strap or even dipped headfirst in the water cistern if they became sleepy. Children were also punished for arriving to work late or for talking to other children. If they ran away from the factory, they were at risk of being sent to prison. Sarah Carpenter, a factory worker from Derbyshire, accounted her life as a child worker at Cressbrook Mill: There was an overlooker called William Hughes, who was put in his place whilst he was ill. He came up to me and asked me what my drawing frame was stopped for. I said I did not know because it was not me who had stopped it. A little boy that was on the other side had stopped it, but he was too frightened to say it was him. Hughes starting beating me with a stick, and when he had done I told him I would let my mother know. He then went out and fetched the master in to me. The master started beating me with a stick over the head till it was full of lumps and bled. My head was so bad that I could not sleep for a long time, and I never been a sound sleeper since (Spartacus).

Because of the poor working conditions for children in mills and factories, some reformers formed Short Time Committees to support the passage of a

bill that would restrict child labor. Textile workers in Huddersfield, Leeds and most of the major textile towns formed these committees. They held public meetings in which they endeavored to persuade people to sign petitions supporting the bill. In 1831 John Hobhouse, the Radical M. P. for Westminster, proposed that: (a) no child should work in a factory before the age of 9; (b) no one between the ages of 9 and 18 should work for more than twelve hours; (c) no one aged between the ages of 9 and 18 should work for more than 66 hours a week; (d) no one under 18 should be allowed to do night work (Spartacus). Hobhouse's Bill was passed, but only applied to cotton factories. The Short Time Committees campaigned and remained active until the 1847 Factory Act was passed which limited the hours of labor from 63 to 58 per week.

Because the British Industrial Revolution was the first industrial revolution that occurred without some prior planning or foresight, it has provided a blue print that can be used to apply its concepts, techniques and processes to current nations that are not yet industrialized. Those nations that are characterized by dramatic changes in technology, agriculture, foreign trade, and transportation along with a stable government and a potential labor force may find themselves developing their own industrial revolutions. Of course the issue of child labor during the British Industrial Revolution has also provided examples of what should and should not be done in reference to regulations of using children as a labor force. There were 8 different Factory Acts that were established between 1802 and 1891 that eventually led to the minimum age that a child could work from 10 to 11 years old.



There were also factory inspectors appointed by the government to insure that there were no children working in the factories who were under the minimum age. Many books were published that told the stories of the child workers and the factory conditions. Some of them were even autobiographies. Critics of the authors suggested the books would result in revolts and factory burnings. A group of children formed a group called the Manchester Factory Children Committee which supported factory legislation. All of these tactics that were used to discontinue unsatisfactory child labor episodes also played a role in the long-term impact on child labor issues in other parts of the world. Organized international efforts began with the first International Labour Conference in Berlin in 1890 (Encyclopedia Britannica). Soon after, other international movements began. Such organizations as the Child Labor Coalition (CLC) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) are now available to ensure the fundamental rights of children all around the world. These organizations are concerned with such matters as children employed in extreme and hazardous forms of work, the use of inappropriate tools designed for adults, and working children who are not receiving an education. Although there are still child labor problems in many underdeveloped and even industrialized parts of the world, the British Industrial Revolution had revealed the need for an insight into the rights of a childhood to be preserved in children.