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Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution

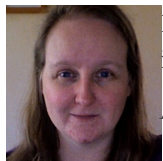
Jane Humphries answers reader questions on childhood and child labour

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| Tuesday 28th February 2012 | Submitted by: Charlotte Hodgman |
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Jane Humphries draws on first-hand accounts to describe the experiences of child labourers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Britain. Her book examines the work the children undertook, as well as their family lives, education, and their occasional pleasures.

As part of our reader book club, *BBC History Magazine* gave people the chance to

read *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* and put their questions to the book's author, Professor Jane Humphries. Here's what they had to say...



Did any businesses actively eschew child labour prior to the introduction of reforms?

Amanda Nellist, Sydney

Jane says: Some employers had stopped employing children, but this was usually for technological not ethical reasons. Indeed, therein lay a sinister motive to champion regulation as employers who had dispensed with children sought an advantage over child-dependant rivals. For example, employers in thick-seamed coalfields where ponies had supplanted underground child labour supported legislation to steal a competitive march on rivals operating thin-seam pits where child labour remained essential.

Philanthropic ideals did influence some employers. The Gregg's, who used parish apprentices (orphaned or abandoned children) at Quarry Bank Mill in Cheshire, purpose-built accommodation, provided education and medical care, and, by historical standards, decent food and clothing. Hours, however, remained long and discipline strict. Other employers were caught up in a competitive "race to the bottom" and claimed to be unable to reduce hours or improve conditions. Silk manufacturers, for example, resisted regulation, arguing that it would disadvantage them in foreign competition.

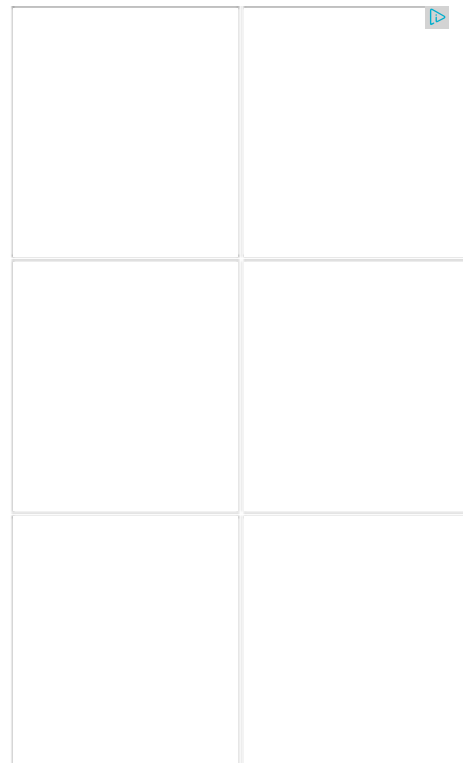
Early protective labour legislation was a feeble weapon: the inspectorate was miniscule; sanctions were inconsequential; and poverty drove parents to collaborate in evasion. Desperate mothers padded children's shoes to make them seem taller or (later) falsified birth certificates. Regulation, which began to be effective after 1833, was limited to factories and only later extended to workshops, mines and agriculture.

Some historians, persuaded that the state would never have seriously discommoded employers, argue that regulation followed rather than caused the decline in child labour. I think that 19th-century reform accompanied and strengthened changing views. Educated children became an aspiration for working-class parents, enlightened employers and politicians conscious of the need for social progress.

Many poorer children were required to leave home and support themselves. How did they cope in these circumstances?

Sophie Hetherington, Warwickshire

Jane says: Although leaving home was an economic necessity in these hard-



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pressed households, parents tried to ensure that the move gave their child a chance in life. They sought tolerable jobs, promising apprenticeships, fair masters and steady workmates. Siblings who had already left home, eased the way for younger children by sharing accommodation or identifying opportunities.

Parents continued to support offspring, rescuing them from miserable berths or rash misadventures and providing refuge if they became ill or unemployed. More distant relatives, friends, and co-religionists played similar roles, their involvement reinforcing wider social networks.

The poor law provided an additional resource, especially valuable to orphaned and abandoned children whom it was charged to support. Although sometimes harsh, surprisingly perhaps, the poor law is recalled as providing lifelines in the form of shelter, apprenticeships and even education. Nevertheless, as with young people today, autobiographers found the transition from an institutionalised childhood to adult independence daunting.

Would the industrial revolution have been possible without child labour?

Lloyd Jones, Merthyr Tydfil

Jane says: “Whoever says Industrial Revolution says cotton!” (Eric Hobsbawm). The textile industry exemplifies industrialisation with its use of machinery, nascent factory system, and growing exports. Yet its growth was conditional on child labour. Without parish apprentices the early mills, dependent on waterpower and built in rural locations, could not have developed in the way and at the pace that they did. Later when steam power was applied and industry moved to the towns, poor children were preferred to more expensive adults who resisted factory discipline.

Beyond the factories, children were a vital component of the work force in coalmines, in traditional workshops, in the burgeoning service sector and in still-important agriculture. Wherever size, strength and skills did not prevent it, children could be employed and even heavy jobs could be divided into child-size tasks, as the thousands of children who laboured in Britain’s brickfields knew. Whoever says industrial revolution says child labour!

How does child labour in developing countries today compare to child labour in the industrial revolution?

Sallyanne Howell, Bristol

<https://t.co/rE28zYgHcD>

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Jane says: In developing countries, most children work on family farms. Historically too, agriculture was a big employer, but in Britain, without peasant proprietorship, they worked as wage labourers or farm servants. Family labour is not necessarily more salubrious than waged work. Nor can we assume that child labour is anachronistic, surviving only in the most backward firms and industries. Modern economic growth can boost child employment.

The news recently featured two small Gujarati girls sent miles away from home to pick cotton. The cotton then shed its shameful origins in a supply chain that passed through cutting-edge factories to finish in garments purchased by ethical consumers on western high streets.

The Gujarati children's situation was almost identical to that of children working in gangs in 19th century East Anglia, then the most advanced agricultural region in Britain. Even child soldiers, those tragic symbols of modern brutality, had their counterparts in the armies and navies that provided the iron fist behind industrialising Britain's mercantilist policies.

Your book states that young children could earn almost the same wage as an adult. Was it the case that the adult worker was largely worn out by the harshness of the job, combined with poverty, or was there some other reason for this perceived parity at such a young age?

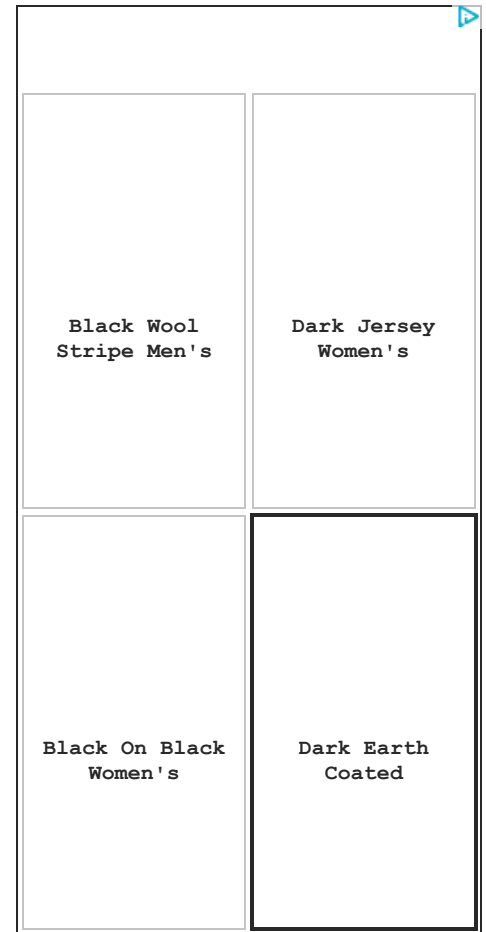
Chris Lawson, Sussex

Jane says: Better-paid early industrial jobs required strength and/or skill and could only be done by grown men. Even strapping teenagers did not have the physique for cooperage or the skill for traditional shoemaking. However, old age came early in these hard times.

The autobiographies are full of men worn out by the demands of their job, or rendered decrepit by alcoholism or left disabled and traumatised by service in the armed forces. By their teens, lads could do better. Joseph Arch earned as much as his arthritic father by the time he was 12, and more by the age of 16. More generally, across a variety of trades, skill and strength requirements were being stripped out of sub-divided and mechanised production processes, and children substituted for displaced adults. By the 1840s, some child textile factory worker could earn as much as handloom weavers or unskilled labourers.

If sons could hope to out-earn fathers by late adolescence, they passed their usually unskilled, less strong, and domestically constrained mothers by the age of ten or eleven. Not surprisingly, sons not mothers were families' most important secondary earners and without fathers became the main breadwinners.

Next month we'll be looking at *Eva Braun: Life with Hitler* by Heike Görtemaker.



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