

Child Labor

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution in England in the mid 1700s, children shifted from working on farms or in the home to working in textile factories, brick yards, and coal mines. Once children began working in the factories, parents could no longer watch over them as they had previously when they worked on farms. Poor families could not afford enough food to keep their children healthy, so children had weaker bodies and were more likely to get sick from the dusty air or become deformed from accidents with machines. Factory owners paid children extremely low wages—10 percent of adult males' wages—for long hours and often difficult work.

As concerns about the welfare of children rose in the mid 1800s, Parliament (the English government legislature) held investigations to find out the conditions of children workers. Below is an interview between a parliamentary investigator and factory worker Elizabeth Bentley about her experiences:

What time did you begin to work at a factory? *When I was six years old.*

What was your business in that mill? *I was a little doffer [worker who changes the bobbins on the frames in the spinning machines].*

What were your usual hours of labor in that mill? *From 6 in the morning till 7 at night.*

What time was allowed for your meals? *Forty minutes at noon.*

Had you any time to get your breakfast or drinking? *No, we got it as we could.*

Do you consider doffing a laborious [hard, tiring] employment? *Yes.*

Does [your work] keep you constantly on your feet? *Yes, there are so many frames, and they run so quick.*

Your labor is very excessive? *Yes; you have not time for anything.*

Suppose you flagged [slowed down] a little, or were too late, what would they do? *Strap [beat] us.*

Are they in the habit of strapping those who are last in doffing? *Yes.*

Constantly? *Yes.*

Girls as well as boys? *Yes.*

Have you ever been strapped? *Yes.*

Severely? *Yes.*

Could you eat your food well in that factory? *No, indeed, I had not much to eat, and the little I had I could not eat it, my appetite was so poor, and being covered with dust; and it was no use to take it home, I could not eat it, and the overlooker took it, and gave it to the pigs.*

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Children perform the heavy labor of transporting bricks in the brickyards of England in the nineteenth century.