

Working Conditions and Wages

Until about 1750, most people in Britain lived in small villages and farmed, raised animals, or worked as craftspeople. Farming families also spun wool or wove cloth in their homes to sell at the market. Men, women, and children worked hard every day of the week from morning until night, but most still struggled to earn a living.

As the Industrial Revolution developed through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more and more people moved away from their villages to work in mines and textile factories. A common working day in a factory was 12 to 14 hours long, with short breaks for meals. Workers labored six days a week in 80-degree heat with machinery that needed constant attention. Overseers (managers) fined workers or threatened to fire them if they were not paying close attention to their work at all times. The factories were extremely dirty and dangerous, with low ceilings, locked windows and doors, and poor lighting. Workers risked losing limbs from loud, unguarded machines or getting serious throat or lung infections from the hot, polluted factory air.

A prominent nineteenth-century writer, Charles Dickens, describes the rhythm of life for the factory workers in his book *Hard Times*:

[They were] all equally like one another. All went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavement, to do the same work to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of last and the next.

Employers paid low wages and would reduce them if workers were late or business was bad. Some factory owners paid their employees with vouchers for goods at their own stores, where they kept prices very high. Below is a breakdown of the wages paid to workers in the 1780s.



men

10 to 15 shillings
per week



women

5 shillings
per week



children

1 shilling
per week

(In the early 1800s, one pound of tea cost 6 shillings, and rent cost 5 shillings a month.)

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Here are the lyrics to a British industrial folk song written by Thomas Raine, a miner from Teesdale, England, in the early 1800s. He describes the work of young boys in lead mines, who separated lead from gravel and clay in washing rakes to prepare it to be sold.

“Four Pence a Day”



The ore [metal] is waiting in the tubs, the snow's upon the fell.
Canny [fine] folk are sleeping yet, but lead is reet [ready] to sell.
Come, me little washer lad, come, let's away,
We're bound down to slavery for four-pence a day.



It's early in the morning, we rise at five o'clock,
And the little slaves come to the door to knock, knock, knock.
Come, me little washer lad, come let's away,
It's very hard to work for four-pence a day.



My father was a miner and lived down in the town;
'Twas hard work and poverty that always kept him down.
He aimed for me to go to school but brass [money] he couldn't pay,
So I had to go to the washing rake for four-pence a day.

My mother rises out of bed with tears on her cheeks,
Puts my wallet on my shoulders which has to serve a week.
It often fills her great big heart when she unto me does say,
“I never thought thou would have worked for four-pence a day.”



Four-pence a day, me lad, and very hard to work,
And never a pleasant look from a gruffy looking clerk.
His conscience it may fall and his heart it may give way,
Then he'll raise our wages to nine-pence a day.

