

Volume 2: Chapter 6

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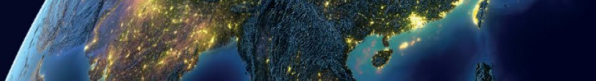
Edwin Chadwick's *Inquiry into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842)

Edwin Chadwick (1800-1890) was an English social reformer who witnessed the social, economic, and health effects of industrial labor conditions in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. Trained as a lawyer, he worked in the 1830s as an investigator and secretary for the Royal Commission, studying the effectiveness of the English Poor Laws. He documented the working and living conditions of the industrial working classes in England and pushed for public health reforms. His "Report on Sanitary Conditions" documented the appalling working environment in British shops and factories. He clearly established the connection between inadequate sanitation and disease. As a consequence of his investigations, Parliament legislated the first Public Health Act in 1848, a law that marked the beginning of government intervention to improve public sanitation and prevent disease.

CIRCUMSTANCES CHIEFLY IN THE INTERNAL ECONOMY AND BAD VENTILATION OF PLACES OF WORK; WORKMEN'S LODGING-HOUSES, DWELLINGS, AND THE DOMESTIC HABITS AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF THE LABOURING CLASSES.

The evils arising from the bad ventilation of places of work will probably be most distinctly brought to view, by the consideration of the evidence as to its effects on one particular class of workpeople.

The frequency of cases of early deaths, and orphanage, and widowhood amongst one class of labourers, the journeymen tailors, led me to make some inquiries as to the causes affecting them; and I submit the following evidence for peculiar consideration, as an illustration of the operation of one predominant cause; bad ventilation or overcrowding, and

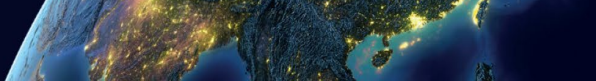


the consequences on the moral habits, the loss of healthful existence and happiness to the labourer, the loss of profit to the employer, and of produce to the community, and the loss in expenditure for the relief of the destitution, which original cause (the bad ventilation) we have high scientific authority for stating to be easily and economically controllable.

Mr. Thomas Brownlow, tailor, aged 52:

“It is stated that you have been a journeyman tailor, and now work for yourself. At what description of places have you worked?—I have always worked at the largest places in London; one part of my time I worked at Messrs. Allen's, of Old Bond-street where I worked eight years; at another part of my time I worked at Messrs. Stultze's, in Clifford-street, where I worked four years. At Messrs. Allen's they had then from 80 to 100 men at work; at Messrs. Stultze's they had, when I worked there, about 250 men.

“Will you describe the places of work, and the effects manifested in the health of the workmen?—The place in which we used to work at Messrs. Allen's was a room where 80 men worked together. It was a room about 16 or 18 yards long, and 7 or 8 yards wide, lighted with skylights; the men were close together, nearly knee to knee. In summer time the heat of the men and the heat of the irons made the room 20 or 30 degrees higher than the heat outside; the heat was then most suffocating, especially after the candles were lighted. I have known young men, tailors from the country, faint away in the shop from the excessive heat and closeness; persons, workingmen, coming into the shop to see some of the men, used to complain of the heat, and also of the smell as intolerable; the smell occasioned by the heat of the irons and the various breaths of the men really was at times intolerable. The men sat as loosely as they possibly could, and the perspiration ran from them from the heat and the closeness. It is of frequent occurrence in such workshops that light suits of clothes are spoiled from the perspiration of the hand, and the dust and flue which arises darkening the work. I



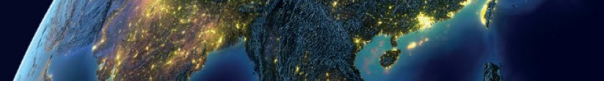
have seen £40 or £50 worth of work spoiled in the course of the summer season from this cause.

“In what condition are these work-places in winter?—They are more unhealthy in winter, as the heat from the candles and the closeness is much greater. Any cold currents of air which come in give annoyance to those who are sitting near the draught. There is continued squabbling as to the windows being opened; those who are near the windows, and who do not feel the heat so much as the men near the stoves, objecting to their being opened. The oldest, who had been inured to the heat, did not like the cold, and generally prevailed in keeping out the cold or the fresh air. Such has been the state of the atmosphere, that in the very coldest nights large thick tallow candles (quarter of a pound candles) have melted and fallen over from the heat.

“What was the effect of this state of the work-places upon the habits of the workmen?—It had a very depressing effect on the energies; that was the general complaint of those who came into it. Many could not stay out the hours, and went away earlier. Those who were not accustomed to the places generally lost appetite. The natural effect of the depression was, that we had recourse to drink as a stimulant. We went into the shop at six o'clock in the morning; but at seven o'clock, when orders for the breakfast were called for, gin was brought in, and the common allowance was half-a-quartern. The younger hands did not begin with gin.

“Was gin the first thing taken before any solid food was taken?—Yes, and the breakfast was very light; those who took gin generally took only half-a-pint of tea and half a two-penny loaf as breakfast.

“When again was liquor brought in?—At eleven o'clock.



“What was taken then? Some took beer, some took gin again. In a general way, they took a pint of porter at eleven o'clock. It was seldom the men took more than the halfquartern of gin.

“When again was liquor brought in?—At three o'clock, when some took beer and some gin, just the same as in the morning. At five o'clock the beer and gin came in again, and was usually taken in the same quantities. At seven o'clock the shop was closed.

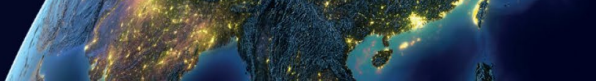
“After work was there any drinking? Yes; nearly all the young men went to the public-house, and some of the others.

“What were the wages they received?—Sixpence per hour, which, at the full work, made 6s. a-day, or 36s. a-week.

“Did they make any reserves from this amount of wages?—No; very few had anything for themselves at the end of the week.

“How much of the habit of drinking was produced by the state of the work-place?—I should say the greater part of it; because when men work by themselves, or only two or three together, in cooler and less close places, there is scarcely any drinking between times. Nearly all this drinking proceeds from the large shops, where the men are crowded together in close rooms: it is the same in the shops in the country, as well as those in the town. In a rural place, the tailor, where he works by himself, or with only two or three together, takes very little of the fermented liquor or spirits which the men feel themselves under a sort of necessity for doing in towns. The closer the ventilation of the place of work, the worse are the habits of the men working in them.

“You referred to the practice of one large shop where you worked some time since; was that the general practice, and has there been no alteration?—It was and is now the general practice. Of late, since coffee has become cheaper, somewhat more of coffee and less



of beer has been bought in; but there is as much gin now brought in between times, and sometimes more.

“What would be the effect of an alteration of the place of work—a ventilation which would give them a better atmosphere? —It would, without doubt, have an immediately beneficial effect on the habits. It might not cure those who have got into the habit of drinking; but the men would certainly drink less, and the younger ones would not be led into the habit so forcibly as they are.

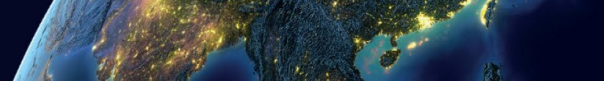
“What is the general effect of this state of things upon the health of the men exposed to them?—Great numbers of them die of consumption. 'A decline' is the general disease of which they die. By their own rules, a man at 50 years of age is superannuated, and is thought not to be fit to do a full day's work.

“What was the average of the ages of men at work at such shops as those you have worked at?—Thirty-two, or thereabouts.

“In such shops were there many superannuated men, or men above 50 years of age? —Very few. Amongst the tailors employed in the shops, I should say there were not 10 men in the hundred above 50 years of age.

“When they die, what becomes of their widows and children, as they seldom make any reserve of wages?—No provision is made for the families; nothing is heard of them, and, if they cannot provide for themselves, they must go upon the parish.

“Are these habits created by the closeness of the rooms, attended by carelessness as to their mode of living elsewhere?—I think not as to their lodgings. The English and Scotch tailors are more careful as to their places of lodging, and prefer sleeping in an open place. The men, however, who take their pint of porter and their pipe of tobacco in a public-house after their hours of work, take it at a place which is sometimes as crowded as a shop. Here the single men will stay until bedtime.



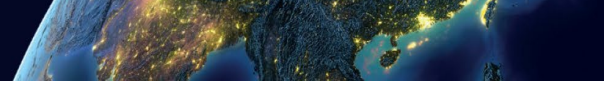
“Are gin and beer the only stimulants which you conceive are taken in consequence of the want of ventilation and the state of the place of work when crowded?—No: snuff is very much taken as a stimulant; the men think snuff has a beneficial effect on the eyes. After going into these close shops from the open air, the first sensation experienced is frequently a sensation of drowsiness, then a sort of itching or uneasiness at the eye, then a dimness of the sight. Some men of the strongest sight will complain of this dimness; all eyes are affected much in a similar manner. Snuff is much used as a stimulant to awaken them up; smoking in the shops is not approved of, though it is much attempted; and the journeymen tailors of the large shops are in general great smokers at the public-houses.

“Do the tailors from villages take snuff or smoke as well as drink so much as the tailors in the large shops in the towns?—They neither take so much snuff nor tobacco, nor so much of any of the stimulants, as are taken by the workmen in the crowded shops of the towns.

“Do their eyes fail them as soon? —No, certainly not.

“With the tailors, is it the eye that fails first?—Yes; after long hours of work the first thing complained of by the tailors is that the eyes fail; the sight becomes dim, and a sort of mist comes between them and their work.

“Judging from your own practical experience, how long do you conceive that a man would work in well-ventilated or uncrowded room, as compared with a close, crowded, ill-ventilated room?—I think it would make a difference of two hours in the day to a man. He would, for example, be able, in an uncrowded or well-ventilated room, to do his twelve hours' work in the twelve hours; whereas in the close-crowded room he would not do more than ten hours' work in the twelve ...



Source: Edwin Chadwick, *Report to Her Majesty's principal secretary of state for the Home Department from the Poor Law Commissioners, on an inquiry into the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain; with appendices. Presented to both Houses of Parliament, by command of Her Majesty, July, 1842* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1842): 98-101, Internet Archive, archive.org.

- How does Chadwick's report describe the health and working conditions of journeyman tailors? Which aspects of this account did you find particularly striking?
- Specifically, what does Thomas Brownlow's firsthand account reveal about the working conditions of tailors?
- From this account what generalizations would you make regarding the effects of industrialization on the lives of England's poor and working classes in the mid-1800s?