

Child Labour

Today it is illegal for children under the age of sixteen to work full time, but this was not the case in Victorian Britain. A boy like Soot working as a chimney sweep would not have been unusual in the early Victorian period. With no state financial support, and big families to feed, sending children out to work was often the only means of survival for poor people whose only alternative would have been the Workhouse. It suited employers too, as pay rates for children were far lower than those of adults. All over the country, in towns and cities, big factories and mills were springing up. Children were particularly useful, as their small, dexterous fingers were excellent for picking fluff out of machines to ensure they ran smoothly, or crawling under them to pick up any stray fibres. Children were employed to work underground in coal mines as well as street sellers, bird scarers or rat catchers on farms or as domestic servants in big houses. Children as young as seven would work for around seventy two hours a week usually doing the dirtiest and most boring jobs in dreadful conditions. They had few or no rights, and could suffer horrible punishments.

Exercise 1

Look at the pictures below. Can you guess what jobs they are doing?



The working conditions children faced were dreadful. For many, the risk of injury even death was very high. Whilst several laws were passed limiting an Employers use of child labourers, it wasn't until 1880 that the practice was finally outlawed, and the Government made schooling compulsory for all children up to the age of ten.

Exercise 2

Below is a description of some of the most dangerous jobs children would have done in Victorian times.

Chimney Sweeps

This was probably the most dangerous. The job involved climbing down the inside of a chimney from the roof to the fireplace below, cleaning the soot off the walls. The chimney stacks were narrow and sweeps would find the skin being scraped off their arms, elbows, legs and knees. The biggest dangers were falling down or becoming stuck, as well as a forgetful occupant lighting a fire. Breathing in soot caused lung damage and sweeps rarely made it to middle age. Children were underfed by their bosses so they would stay small. Often orphans were used, and would be dumped on the streets when they grew too big to be useful. Children as young as three years old are thought to have been used to sweep chimneys.

Factory and Mill Work

In towns and cities, children would be employed in factories doing the simple, repetitive jobs, making a huge variety of goods. Being in close contact with huge machines was perilous as there were very few safety guards and injuries, even deaths were frequent. Breathing in dusty air caused lung damage and the constant noise caused hearing problems. They were expected to work long hours with very little time for meals.

In cotton mills children would work as 'Piecers' – crawling under the machines to tie broken threads together, 'Can Tenterers' – carrying huge cans of cotton yarn to the weaving frames and 'Scavengers' – picking up any bits that had fallen under the machines. Children also had to clean the machines, often while they were left running.

Coal Mines

The manufacturing boom brought a huge need for coal to power the steam driven machines. Mining companies were keen to employ children, not only to dig out coal from inaccessible places, but also to work as 'trappers'. This involved working underground, opening and closing the wooden doors (trap doors) that allowed fresh air to flow through the **mine**. They would usually sit in total darkness for up to twelve hours at a time, waiting to let the **coal** tub through the door. The constant darkness caused eye problems, the lack of ventilation affected their lungs and many children suffered spine deformities from working hunched over for such long periods. There was a constant danger of explosions, floods or cave ins.

What's my job?

Imagine you are a Victorian child worker. In groups of five or six, make a still picture of yourselves at work.

If you are in a factory, decide what you are making and what sort of machines you have to work with. If you are in a mine, what job does each person do? If you are chimney sweeps, what age are you? Are the older ones in charge of the youngsters?

Share it with the rest of the class and ask them to guess what job you are doing.

Petition for better working conditions

- Imagine that there has been another injury or death in your factory / mine/ Chimney sweeping group.
- You have had enough of working in such dangerous conditions for such low pay.
- In your group, discuss your predicament. None of you can risk losing your jobs as your families all need the money, but you cannot go on as you are.
- Devise a list of the essential changes that you want to see.
- Asking employers for better pay and conditions is very dangerous as there is a real risk of losing your jobs. By way of practice, each group

presents their list of 'demands' to the rest of the class, who assume the roles of employers.

- What advice can each group be given on how to present their case in a way that would be most acceptable to their bosses?
- Each group writes a formal letter asking for changes.
- The teacher, in role as the employer, replies to the letters stating what changes he/she is prepared to make, if any, and why.