

The Life of the Industrial Worker in Nineteenth-Century England

1832

In 1832, British Tory MP Michael Sadler secured a parliamentary investigation of conditions in the textile factories and sat as chairman on the committee. The evidence printed here is taken from the large body published in the committee's report. It will be observed that the questions are frequently leading; this reflects Sadler's knowledge of the sort of information that the committee were to hear and his purpose of bringing it out. This report stands out as a great report on the life of the industrial class. The immediate effect of the investigation and the report was the passage of the Act of 1833 limiting hours of employment for women and children in textile work.

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Evidence Given Before the Sadler Committee

[Parliamentary Papers, 1831-1832, vol. XV. pp. 44, 95-97, 115, 195, 197, 339, 341-342.]

Joshua Drake, called in; and Examined.

You say you would prefer moderate labour and lower wages; are you pretty comfortable upon your present wages? --I have no wages, but two days a week at present; but when I am working at some jobs we can make a little, and at others we do very poorly.

When a child gets 3s. a week, does that go much towards its subsistence? --No, it will not keep it as it should do.

When they got 6s. or 7s. when they were pieceners, if they reduced the hours of labor, would they not get less? — They would get a halfpenny a day less, but I would rather have less wages and less work.

Do you receive any parish assistance? — No.

Why do you allow your children to go to work at those places where they are ill-treated or over-worked? — Necessity compels a man that has children to let them work.

Then you would not allow your children to go to those factories under the present system, if it was not from necessity? — No.

Supposing there was a law passed to limit the hours of labour to eight hours a day, or something of that sort, of course you are aware that a manufacturer could not afford to pay them the same wages? — No, I do not suppose that they would, but at the same time I would rather have it, and I believe that it would bring me into employ; and if I lost 5d. a day from my children's work, and I got half-a-crown myself, it would be better.

How would it get you into employ? — By finding more employment at the machines, and work being more regularly spread abroad, and divided amongst the people at large. One man is now regularly turned off into the street, whilst another man is running day and night.

You mean to say, that if the manufacturers were to limit the hours of labour, they would employ more people? — Yes.

Mr. Matthew Crabtree, called in; and Examined.

What age are you? — Twenty-two.

What is your occupation? — A blanket manufacturer.

Have you ever been employed in a factory? — Yes.

At what age did you first go to work in one? — Eight.

How long did you continue in that occupation? — Four years.

Will you state the hours of labour at the period when you first went to the factory, in ordinary times? — From 6 in the morning to 8 at night.

Fourteen hours? — Yes.

With what intervals for refreshment and rest? — An hour at noon.

When trade was brisk what were your hours? — From 5 in the morning to 9 in the evening.

Sixteen hours? — Yes.

With what intervals at dinner? — An hour.

How far did you live from the mill? — About two miles.

Was there any time allowed for you to get your breakfast in the mill? — No.

Did you take it before you left your home? — Generally.

During those long hours of labour could you be punctual; how did you awake? — I seldom did awake spontaneously; I was most generally awoke or lifted out of bed, sometimes asleep, by my parents.

Were you always in time? — No.

What was the consequence if you had been too late? — I was most commonly beaten.

Severely? — Very severely, I thought.

In those mills is chastisement towards the latter part of the day going on perpetually? — Perpetually.

So that you can hardly be in a mill without hearing constant crying? — Never an hour, I believe.

Do you think that if the overlooker were naturally a humane person it would still be found necessary for him to beat the children, in order to keep up their attention and vigilance at the termination of those extraordinary days of labour? — Yes; the machine turns off a regular quantity of cardings, and of course, they must keep as regularly to their work the whole of the day; they must keep with the machine, and therefore however humane the slubber may be, as he must keep up with the machine or be found fault with, he spurs the children to keep up also by various means but that which he commonly resorts to is to strap them when they become drowsy.

At the time when you were beaten for not keeping up with your work, were you anxious to have done it if you possibly could? — Yes; the dread of being beaten if we could not keep up with our work was a sufficient impulse to keep us to it if we could.

When you got home at night after this labour, did you feel much fatigued? — Very much so. Had you any time to be with your parents, and to receive instruction from them? — No.

What did you do? — All that we did when we got home was to get the little bit of supper that was provided for us and go to bed immediately. If the supper had not been ready directly, we should have gone to sleep while it was preparing.

Did you not, as a child, feel it a very grievous hardship to be roused so soon in the morning? — I did.

Were the rest of the children similarly circumstanced? — Yes, all of them; but they were not all of them so far from their work as I was.

And if you had been too late you were under the apprehension of being cruelly beaten? — I generally was beaten when I happened to be too late; and when I got up in the morning the apprehension of that was so great, that I used to run, and cry all the way as I went to the mill.

Mr. John Hall, called in; and Examined.

Will you describe to the Committee the position in which the children stand to piece in a worsted mill, as it may serve to explain the number and severity of those cases of distortion which occur? — At the top to the spindle there is a fly goes across, and the child takes hold of the fly by the ball of his left hand, and he throws the left shoulder up and the right knee inward; he has the thread to get with the right hand, and he has to stoop his head down to see what he is doing; they throw the right knee inward in that way, and all the children I have seen, that bend in the right knee. I knew a family, the whole of whom were bent outwards as a family complaint, and one of those boys was sent to a worsted-mill, and first he became straight in his right knee, and then he became crooked in it the other way.

Elizabeth Bentley, called in; and Examined.

What age are you? — Twenty-three.

Where do you live? — At Leeds.

What time did you begin to work at a factory? — When I was six years old. At whose factory did you work? — Mr. Busk's.

What kind of mill is it? — Flax-mill.

What was your business in that mill? — I was a little doffer.

What were your hours of labour in that mill? — From 5 in the morning till 9 at night, when they were thronged.

For how long a time together have you worked that excessive length of time? — For about half a year.

What were your usual hours when you were not so thronged? — 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.

And when your work was bad, you had hardly any time to eat it at all? — No; we were obliged to leave it or take it home, and when we did not take it, the overlooker took it, and gave it to his pigs.

Do you consider doffing a laborious employment? — Yes.

Explain what it is you had to do? — When the frames are full, they have to stop the frames, and take the flyers off, and take the full bobbins off, and carry them to the roller; and then put empty ones on, and set the frame going again.

Does that keep you constantly on your feet? — Yes, there are so many frames, and they run so quick.

Your labour is very excessive? — Yes; you have not time for any thing.

Suppose you flagged a little, or were too late, what would they do? — Strap 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.

You are speaking of the breakfast? — Yes.

How far had you to go for dinner? — We could not go home to dinner. Where did you dine? — In the mill.

Did you live far from the mill? — Yes, two miles.

Had you a clock? — No, we had not.

Supposing you had not been in time enough in the morning at these mills, what would have been the consequence? — We should have been quartered.

What do you mean by that? — If we were a quarter of an hour too late, they would take off half an hour; we only got a penny an hour, and they would take a halfpenny more.

The fine was much more considerable than the loss of time? — Yes.

Were you also beaten for being too late? — No, I was never beaten myself, I have seen the boys beaten for being too late.

Were you generally there in time? — Yes; my mother had been up at 4 o'clock in the morning, and at 2 o'clock in the morning; the colliers used to go to their work about 3 or 4 o'clock, and when she heard them stirring she has got up out of her warm bed, and gone out and asked them the time; and I have sometimes been at Hunslet Car at 2 o'clock in the morning, when it was streaming down with rain, and we have had to stay until the mill was opened.

Peter Smart, called in; and Examined.

You say you were locked up night and day? — Yes.

Do the children ever attempt to run away? — Very often.

Were they pushed and brought back again? — Yes, the overseer pursued them, and brought them back.

Did you ever attempt to run away? — Yes, I ran away twice.

And you were brought back? — Yes; and I was sent up to the master's loft, and thrashed with a whip for running away.

Were you bound to this man? — Yes, for six years.

By whom were you bound? — My mother got 15s. for the six years.

Do you know whether the children were, in point of fact, compelled to stop during the whole time for which they were engaged? — Yes, they were.

By law? — I cannot say by law; but they were compelled by the master; I never saw any law used there but the law of their own hands.

To what mill did you next go? — To Mr. Webster's, at Battus Den, within eleven miles of Dundee.

In what situation did you act there? — I acted as overseer.

At 17 years of age? — Yes.

Did you inflict the same punishment that you yourself had experienced? — I went as an overseer; not as a slave, but as a slave-driver.

What were the hours of labour in that mill? — My master told me that I had to produce a certain quantity of yarn; the hours were at that time fourteen; I said that I was not able to produce the quantity of yarn that was required; I told him if he took the timepiece out of the mill I would produce that quantity, and after that time I found no difficulty in producing the quantity.

How long have you worked per day in order to produce the quantity your master required? — I have wrought nineteen hours.

Was this a water-mill? — Yes, water and steam both.

To what time have you worked? — I have seen the mill going till it was past 12 o'clock on the Saturday night.

So that the mill was still working on the Sabbath morning? — Yes.

Were the workmen paid by the piece, or by the day? — No, all had stated wages.

Did not that almost compel you to use great severity to the hands then under you? — Yes; I was compelled often to beat them, in order to get them to attend to their work, from their being overwrought.

Were not the children exceedingly fatigued at that time? — Yes, exceedingly fatigued.

Were the children bound in the same way in that mill? — No; they were bound from one year's end to another, for twelve months.

Did you keep the hands locked up in the same way in that mill? — Yes, we locked up the mill; but we did not lock the bothy.

Did you find that the children were unable to pursue their labour properly to that extent? — Yes; they have been brought to that condition, that I have gone and fetched up the doctor to them, to see what was the matter with them, and to know whether they were able to rise or not able to rise; they were not at all able to rise; we have had great difficulty in getting them up.

When that was the case, how long have they been in bed, generally speaking? — Perhaps not above four or five hours in their beds. William Cobbett (1763-1835), after a long career as a publicist, entered the Reformed Parliament in 1833 and at once took part in the debate on the bill Lord Althorpe had introduced as a result of the Sadler Committee's report.

Mr. Cobbett's Discovery

[Hansard's Parliamentary Debates. 3rd Series, vol. XIX. July 18, 1833, p.912.]

Mr Cobbett said, a new discovery had been made in the House that night, which would doubtless excite great astonishment in many parts; at all events it would in Lancashire. It had formerly been said that the Navy was the great support of England; at another time that our maritime commerce was the great bulwark of the country; at another time that our colonies; and it had even been whispered that the Bank was; but now it was admitted, that our great stay and bulwark was to be found in three hundred thousand little girls, or rather in one eighth of that number. Yes; for it was asserted, that if these little girls worked two hours less per day, our manufacturing superiority would depart from us.

[The material above was reprinted in an old history textbook, Readings in European History Since 1814, edited by Jonathan F. Scott and Alexander Baltzly, and was published by Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. in 1930. The original sources of the material are listed in footnotes in the book; I've put them in brackets after each subject heading. The explanatory notes between sections are by Scott and Baltzly; the links were, of course, added by me. — L.D.C.]