

“I live partly with my father and grandmother, and partly in the workhouse. When I was nine, I was then bound apprentice to a man who turned me over to the colliers (*coal miners*). My father said to him, ‘I’d rather you tied a stone around his neck and drowned him.’”

Welcome to Britain during the Industrial Revolution.

This is a time of children.

In 1820, 40% of the population were under 15 (years old).

Most were sent to work.

These are their words, stories, & voices.

These are the children of the revolution.

The Children Who Built Victorian Britain

Charles Bacon (age 13 years)

Born: Leicestershire, England ... 1871

“Standing by my father, with a knot of whip cord in my button-hole, which showed that I had a desire to work with horses; I stood there, waiting for the highest bidder for my services. Before I left home, I’d read UNCLE TOM’S CABIN. And when I saw us all lined up, I remember thinking it was much the same in England as it was in America...bar the whip (*without the whip*).”

Robert Blincoe (age 8 years)

Born: London, England ... 1792

Pauper at St. Pancras Workhouse

“A rumor circulated that there was going to be an agreement between the overseers of the workhouse and the owner of a great cotton mill. The children were told that when they arrived at the cotton mill, that they would be transformed into ladies and gentlemen. That they would be fed on roast-beef and plum pudding, and have plenty of cash in their pockets. In August 1799, 80 boys and girls who were seven years old became parish apprentices till they had acquired the age of 21. The young strangers were conducted into a spacious room with long, narrow tables and wooden benches. The supper set before them consisted of milk-porridge of a very blue complexion. Where was our roast beef and plum pudding?”

Sarah Carpenter (Age 9 years)

Born: Bristol, England ... 1840

Sent to work in Derby, 1849

“The master carder's name was Thomas Birks. ‘Tom the Devil’, we called him. He was a very bad man. Everybody was frightened of him. He once fell poorly and very glad we were. We wished he might die. We were always locked up out of mill hours, for fear any of us should run away. One day, the door was left open. Charlotte Smith said she would be ringleader if the rest of us would follow. She went out but no one followed her. The master found out. There was a carving knife, which he took, and grasping her hair, he cut it off close to the head. This head shaving was a dreadful punishment. We were more afraid of it than any other, for girls are proud of their hair.”

William Arnold

Born: Northampton, England ... 1860

First employed at 6 years old

“When I was six and two months old, I was sent off to work. I do not think I shall ever forget those long, hungry days in the fields scaring crows. You can imagine the feeling of loneliness. Hours and hours passed without a living creature coming near. I cried most of the time. In desperation I would shout as loud as I could, ‘Mother! Mother! Mother!’ But Mother could not hear. She was working in the hay field two miles away. By my seventh birthday I was driving the plough. Any repairs to plough or harness had to be taken to tradesmen. Once, after working all day long, I had to carry a plough horse collar that required whittling, and the plough coulter, that needed repairs at the blacksmith. These two heavy things made a burden far too much for me, but I had to trudge with them as best I could the mile and a half across the fields to Everdon.”

Joseph Arch

Born: Barford, Worcestershire, England ... 1826

A “Likely Lad”

“In our village there was a wealthy banker and justice of the peace. I began to drive a pair of horses at plough for him. After a bit, thinking, I suppose, that I was a smart, likely lad, he made me a sort of stable boy and gave me eight shillings a week to start with. Here was a rise for a lad who was set on rising as fast and as much as he could. There were no slack half hours for me, no taking it easy with the other lads. To make more money, to do more, to know more, to be a somebody in my little world was my ambition.”

George Elson (age 10 years)

Born: Northampton, England ... 1860

Climbing Boy in Chimneys

“With a view of immediately testing my capabilities, my new master persuaded me to climb a chimney on my very first morning. With feet standing up on the grate, the body would nearly fill up the width of a chimney. I climbed with my right arm lifted above the head, the left down by my side. The elbows were pressed hard against the brickwork to hold the body suspended until the knees were drawn up. Then the knees on one side and the bare heels (*no clothes allowed in most cases so they wouldn't get trapped*) on the other held me secure. While the right hand applied the scraper to bring down the soot, the knees and elbows, through the constant pressing and the friction with the brickwork, became peeled, thus allowing soot to penetrate. It caused ugly, festering sores which took several weeks to heal. Breathing was always more or less a difficulty. A hood, called a climbing cap, was drawn over the head and tucked in at the neck. But even with that protection, I was subject to the taste and inhalation of every kind of soot into my throat and lungs. Where fires had only just been put out, the sulphurous fumes were sufficient to stifle one. Once the fumes were so strong that I fell from top to bottom, nigh insensible.”

William Rivers (age 16 years)

War Hero

Went to service in the navy at age 6 years

“I had the honor of serving in three general actions. In the first, I received two wounds in my right arm. And in the latter, while receiving orders from his late Lordship, Admiral Nelson, I received a wound on my face, which was shortly followed by a gunshot wound which carried away my left leg.”

William Parker (age 12 years)

Born: Staffordshire, England ... 1781

Marine sailor boy

Letter to his parents

"We had not fired two broadsides (*firing all cannons from one side of the ship*) before an unlucky shot cut a poor man's head right off! The horrid sight, I must confess, did not help raise my spirits. The ship that struck us was so much disabled that she could not live upon the water. It gave a dreadful reel. We were afraid to send any boats to help because they would have been sunk by too many souls getting in her at once. You could plainly perceive the poor wretches climbing over to windward and crying most dreadfully. Even our own men were in tears, groaning, 'God bless them.'"

Alexander Sommerville

Born: East Lothian, England ... 1811

Beneficiary of his older brother's kindness

"William was a stripling (*teenager*) when I was born, and worked for such wages as a youth could obtain in that part of the country. When he came home at night he would strip off his coat, take off his hat, put on his nightcap and get down the box and sort through the old hemp and scraps of leather. He'd examine all the children's feet to see which of them had shoes most in need of mending. And then he would sit down and cobble the shoes by the light of the fire until near midnight. He would rise at four o'clock in the mornings and do the heaviest part of James' work amongst the farmers' cows and other cattle before going to do his own day's work two or three miles distant. James was too young for the heavy task of cleaning, so William got up every morning to do that part of his work and so keep James in employment."

Frank Galton

Born: London, England ... 1867

Child of a jobless saddler (horse saddle maker)

"It was when I was about eight years old that our family misfortune fell to our lowest ebb. The saddling trade in London had been going worse and men were short of work. The large army contracts for cavalry saddles had now gone to the factories. It was the beginning of 1876 when my father was turned off from his work and became unemployed. The effect of these undeserved fortunes on my father was however noticeable to me then and later. After 1876, he became more and more silent, and even morose. There is no greater trial to a self-suspecting and good work man than that of finding his services are not needed, leaving him to spend his days trying to secured a job, only to be met by the sign, 'No hands wanted.' Add to this the misery and poverty when he returns home, and it is not surprising that even a strong-minded man should break down."

The Watercress Girl (age about 8 or 9)

Born: Unknown ... 1840

"On and off, I've been very near 12 months in the street. Before that, I had to take care of a baby for my aunt. No, it wasn't heavy, only two months old. But I minded it for ever such a time until it could walk. Before I had the baby, I used to help my mother who was in the fur trade, and if there were slits in the fur, I'd sew them up. All my money I earned, I puts in a club, and draws it out to buy clothes with. It's better than spending it on sweet stuff, for them that's got a living to earn. I ain't a child, and I shan't be a woman until I'm 20. But I'm past eight, I am."

Even though conditions were difficult, the first official reports about child labor supported the practice and even said the children were happy to work.

Dr. Andrew Ure, M.D.

Born: Glasgow, Scotland ... 1778

Industrial Tourist and Government Commissioner

“I have visited many factories and I never saw a single instance of corporal chastisement (*punishment*) inflicted on a child, nor indeed did I ever see children in ill humor. They seemed to be always cheerful and alert, and the work of these lively little elves seemed to resemble a sport. As to exhaustion of their day's work they evinced (*showed*) no trace of it emerging from the mill in the evening, to commence their little amusements with the same alacrity (*cheerfulness*) as boys issuing from school.”

Michael Sadler

Member of British Parliament

Interviews 48 child workers

1833 – Publishes an official report on child labor

“While I am earnestly pleading the cause of these oppressed children, what numbers of them are still tethered to their toil (*work*), confined in heated rooms, stunned with the roar of revolving wheels, poisoned by the noxious effluvia (*smell*) of grease and gas, till weary and exhausted, they turn shivering to beds from which a relay of their young work fellows have just risen.”

Factory Act of 1833

- Only applied to the textile industry
- Banned kids under 9 years old from working
- Limited work hours of kids aged 9 – 13 to nine hours per day

Sarah Gooder (age 8 years)

Born: Yorkshire, England ... 1836

Pit Girl

“I'm a trapper in the Gawber Pit. It does not tire me, but I have to trap without a light and I'm scared. I go in at four and sometimes half-past three in the morning and come out at half-past five. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark. I don't like being in the pit.”

Since most of the Members of Parliament were wealthy businessmen, many of them had no interest in changing child labor practices

Factory Act of 1884

- Only applied to factories
- Limited work hours for children under aged 13 to 6 ½ hours per day.

Will Thorne (age 9 years)

Born: Birmingham, England ... 1857

Brick Worker and Working Class Hero

“I worked at a brick and tile works that was three miles from our home. Each day, a six-mile walk was added to the day's work of 12 hours. The work was heavy for a lad of my age. Each brick weighed about nine pounds, and in the course of a day I carried several tons (*1 ton = 2,000 pounds*) of clay bricks. We usually started work at six in the morning, when I would pick up the bricks from the floor of the shed. For this I received seven shillings a week. My mother said that the work was too hard and the distance too long for me to walk every morning and night. She told me the money would be missed, someone would have to go short. But it was no use being slowly killed by such work as I was doing, and it was making me hump-backed. It was not until I had been away from the work for several weeks that I was able to straighten myself out again.”

Work was so difficult, that when the kids grew up they got together into unions to demand changes from the lawmakers.

Eventually, after many decades, laws were passed to protect children from the workforce.

Now, instead of working, they were sent to school. Labor is replaced by learning.

“We've always given these children our pity but it's our respect they deserve. They were heroes, whether there's a statue to them or not.”

VOCABULARY

- **apprentice** = a person who is learning a trade from a skilled employer, having agreed to work for a fixed period of time and who earns low wages.
- **indentured** = a contract requiring a person to work for a definite period of time.
- **pauper** = a very poor person.
- **social welfare** = system that provides assistance to needy individuals and families.
- **workhouse** = a public institution in which poor people received board and lodging in return for work.
- **yoke-up** = to collect and harness/control for work.