3.4 Child labour

In the eighteenth century it was normal practice for children to work to help support their family. In agricultural or domestic work situations this had often been under the supervision of parents, who could have some influence over the type of work carried out by their children. This changed in the early years of the Industrial Revolution. Children who worked in factories and mines were subjected to harsh and often brutal conditions.

Children in the textile factories

Owners of textile mills were quick to recognise that they could employ children for lower wages than adults. Indeed, children often outnumbered adults in factory work. It has been estimated that in 1788 more than two-thirds of employees in cotton mills in England and Scotland were children. While older children and teenagers could often take charge of running a spinning or weaving machine, it was the work carried out by younger children that was the most dangerous.

Piecers and scavengers

Children employed as 'piecers' were required to lean over the spinning machine and repair broken threads. They had to do this while the machine was running, and often had more than one machine to watch. It is estimated that a piecer looking after a number of machines could walk as much as 30 kilometres a day. Other children were employed as 'scavengers'. They had to crawl under machines collecting loose cotton and other waste. This task, also performed while machines were running, was particularly dangerous.

Children in the mines

Children in coalmines were employed as 'hurriers' and 'trappers'. Hurriers were required to carry baskets or tow trucks of coal to the surface. Girls as young as six or seven could be employed in this way, and would continue this work into their teens. The belt or chain around a girl's waist could damage the pelvic bones, and many women who worked in the mines as children later died in childbirth.

Source 1

From A Narrative of William Dodd, A Factory Cripple, 1841

At the age of six I became a piecer ... each piecing requires three or four rubs, over a space of three or four inches; and the continual friction of the hand in rubbing the piecing upon the coarse wrapper wears off the skin, and causes the finger to bleed. The position in which the piecer stands to his work is with the right foot forward, and his right side facing the frame. In this position he continues during the day, with his hands, feet, and eyes constantly in motion ... the chiet weight of his body rests upon his right knee, which is almost always the first joint to give way ... my evenings were spent in preparing for the following day — in rubbing my knees, ankles, elbows, and wrists with oil, etc. I went to bed, to cry myself to sleep.

Source 2

From F. Trollope, Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy, 1840

A little girl about seven years old, whose job as scavenger was to collect incessantly from the factory floor, the flying fragments of cotton that might impede the work ... while the hissing machinery passed over her, and when this is skillfully done, and the head, body, and the outstretched limbs carefully glued to the floor, the steady moving, but threatening mass, may pass and repass over the dizzy head and trembling body without touching it. But accidents frequently occur; and many are the flaxen locks, rudely torn from infant heads, in the process.
Even younger children were employed as trappers. Their job was to open and close the ventilation doors in the underground tunnels to allow the hurriers pulling their carts to pass through. Children as young as four or five could be employed as trappers, and they often sat in the dark for up to 14 hours a day.

The ‘climbing boys’

Another occupation that employed large numbers of children, some as young as six, was that of chimney sweep. A sweep would employ a number of young boys, known as ‘climbing boys’, to climb up into chimneys and clean them with a hand brush or metal scraper. It was a dangerous and dirty job. Many choked to death from breathing in the dust and soot, while others were injured by falling or by becoming stuck in narrow chimneys.

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

1. In rural communities children had helped with many different tasks, so the employment of children was not new. Why did child labour become more of a problem during the Industrial Revolution?

2. Why was the employment of children so attractive to the owners of textile factories?

3. Explain the roles of hurriers and trappers in coalmines.

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

4. From Source 1 identify the main types of injuries that could be suffered by piecers in a textile factory.

5. From the information provided in Source 2, explain why the job of scavenger in a textile factory was so dangerous.

6. What were the risks faced by young girls employed as hurriers in coalmines?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

7. The artists who drew Sources 3, 4 and 5 were attempting to present the negative side of child labour. Explain how each artist has achieved this in their drawings.