

Britain's child slaves: They started at 4am, lived off acorns and had nails put through their ears for shoddy work. Yet, says a new book, their misery helped forge Britain

By Annabel Venning, 17 September 2010 (www.dailymail.co.uk)

The tunnel was narrow, and a mere 16in high in places. The workers could barely kneel in it, let alone stand. Thick, choking coal dust filled their lungs as they crawled through the darkness, their knees scraping on the rough surface and their muscles contracting with pain. A single 'hurrier' pulled the heavy cart of coal, weighing as much as 500lb, attached by a chain to a belt worn around the waist, while one or more 'thrusters' pushed from behind. Acrid water dripped from the tunnel ceiling, soaking their ragged clothes.



Many would die from lung cancer and other diseases before they reached 25. For, shockingly, these human beasts of burden were children, some only five years old. Robert North, who worked in a coal mine in Yorkshire, told an inspector: 'I went into the pit at seven years of age. When I drew by the girdle and chain, my skin was broken and the blood ran down ... If we said anything, they would beat us.' Children who worked were subject to appalling conditions. Many who worked died before they reached 25.

Others, like Sarah Gooder, aged eight, were used as 'trappers'. Crouching in the darkness of the tunnel wall, they waited to open trap doors which allowed the carts to travel through.

'I have to trap without a light and I'm scared,' she told the inspector. 'I go at four and sometimes half-past three in the morning, and come out at five-and-half-past ... Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark. I don't like being in the pit.' Most were exhausted by their working hours - they were often woken at 4am and carried, half-asleep, to the pits by their parents.

Many young trappers were killed when they dozed off and fell into the path of the carts. Ten-year-old Joseph Arkley forgot to shut a trap door, allowing poisonous gas to seep into the tunnel. He died along with ten others in the resulting explosion.

But coal mining was just one industry in which children worked during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Industrial Revolution brought immense prosperity to the British Empire. Not only did Britannia rule the waves, she ruled the global marketplace, too, dominating trade in cotton, wool and other commodities. But it was children who serviced the machines, pushed the coal carts and turned the wheels that drove the Industrial Revolution.

Dangerous: Child chimney sweeps often had to crawl through holes only 18in wide - and cruel masters would light fires to make them climb faster. Many fell to their deaths. During the 1830s, the average age of a child labourer officially was ten, but in reality some were as young as four.

Many child scavengers lost limbs or hands, crushed in the machinery; some were even decapitated. In one cotton mill near Cork there were six deaths and 60 mutilations in four years.



Living conditions were appalling. Families occupied rat and sewage-filled cellars, with 30 people crammed into a single room. Most children were malnourished and susceptible to disease, and life expectancy in such places fell to just 29 years in the 1830s. In these wretched circumstances, an extra few pennies brought home by a child would pay for a small loaf of bread or fuel for the fire: the difference between life and death. A third of poor households were without a male breadwinner, either as a result of death or desertion. In the broken Britain of the 19th century, children paid the price.

Children were the ideal labourers: they were cheap (paid just 10-20 per cent of a man's wage) and could fit into small spaces such as under machinery and through narrow tunnels. But while parents sent their children to work with heavy hearts, the workhouses - where orphaned and abandoned children were deposited - had no such scruples. A child sent out to work was one mouth fewer to feed, so they were regularly sold to masters as 'pauper apprentices'. In exchange for board and lodging, they would work without wages until adulthood. If they ran away, they would be caught, whipped and returned to their master.

Children as young as five worked in gangs, digging turnips from frozen soil or spreading manure. Many were so hungry that they resorted to eating rats.

Match makers: Children involved in this process often suffered a horrible disease from breathing phosphorous. The substance ate at their jawbones, leading to brain damage and death

Many child scavengers lost limbs or hands, crushed in. A German visitor to Manchester in 1842 remarked that there were so many limbless people it was like 'living in the midst of an army just returned from campaign'. Supervisors used terror and punishment to drive the children to greater productivity. A boy in a nail-making factory was punished for producing inferior nails by having his head down on an iron counter while someone 'hammered a nail through his ear, and the boy has made good nails ever since'.



But despite the growth of cities, agriculture remained the biggest employer of children during the Industrial Revolution. While they might have escaped the deadly fumes and machinery of the factories, the life of a child farm labourer was every bit as brutal. Children as young as five worked in gangs, digging turnips from frozen soil or spreading manure. Many were so hungry that they resorted to eating rats. The gangmaster walked behind them with a double rope bound with wax, and 'woe betide any boy who made what was called a "straight back" - in other words, standing up straight - before he reached the end of the field. The rope would descend sharply upon him'.

But whenever anyone sought to improve children's working conditions, they encountered fierce opposition from the proprietors whose profits depended on exploiting them. They argued that any interference in the marketplace could cost Britain her manufacturing supremacy. Even when regulations were eventually passed to improve working conditions, with only four inspectors to police the thousands of factories across the country they were seldom enforced.



No idea: Few people had any concept that children, like those pictured here, were being used to excavate coal. The findings of a report in 1842, shocked many.

An Act was passed, prohibiting women and children under ten from working underground. Two years later, another Act was passed prohibiting the textile industry from employing children younger than nine. But it was not until the mid-19th century that children were limited to a 12-hour day. In 1880, the Compulsory Education Act helped reduce the numbers of child labourers, and subsequent laws raised their age and made working conditions safer. But it had come too late for the little white slaves on whose blood, sweat and toil our great railways, bridges and buildings of the Industrial Revolution were built.

Childhood And Child Labour In The British Industrial Revolution, by Professor Jane Humphries, is published by Cambridge University Press at £60. To order a copy (p&p free) for ♦£56.99, please call 0845 155 0720.

Questions:

1. What was a hurrier? _____
2. What was a thruster? _____
3. Many children died before they were how old? _____
4. Coal mining was just one industry that employed child labour. List 3 other industries that children commonly worked in during the Industrial Revolution:
 - i. _____
 - ii. _____
 - iii. _____
5. What was the biggest employer of childhood labour during the 1800's? _____
6. Do you think it would have been enjoyable to be a child during the industrial revolution? Why/why not? _____
