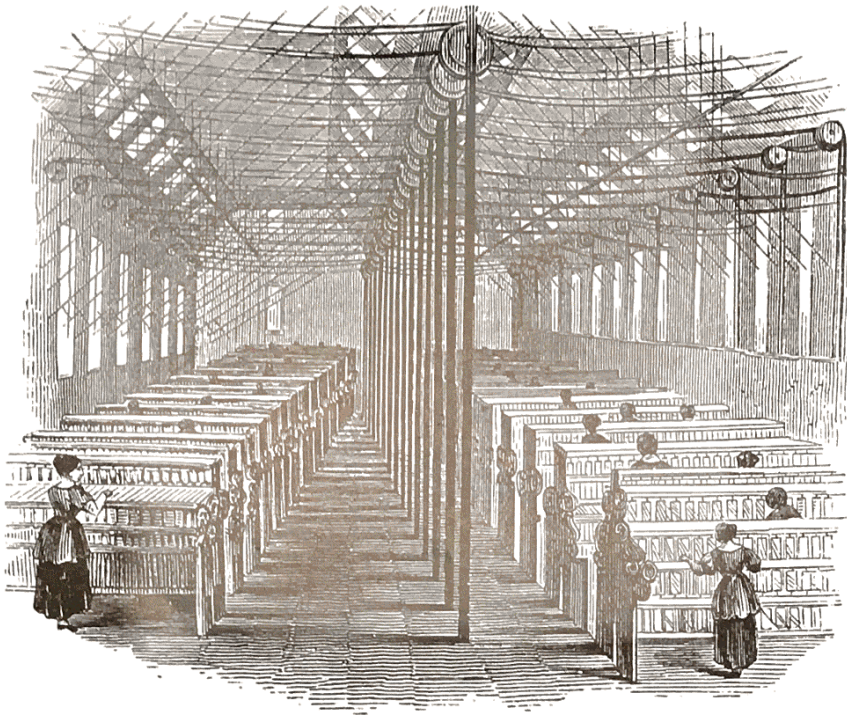


CHILDREN AT WORK



Belfast mill, 1830s

Throughout Queen Victoria's reign children from poor families received little or no schooling, but were made to work to earn desperately needed money. In towns it was sometimes only children and women who could find work in the factories because employers paid them less than men and so preferred to hire them. Before the industrial age, it had always been taken for granted that children

would do their share of the family's work as soon as they were old enough. However, in the 19th century their lives worsened and many children from a very young age had to work up to 12 hours a day in terrible conditions and with dangerous machines which

had no safety guards to prevent accidents. By the time their long day was over they were filthy and exhausted.



Some people were concerned about the awful working conditions in factories and mines. In 1833, a few years before Victoria became Queen, the government set up a Commission of Inquiry to investigate just how bad the conditions were. Here is some of the evidence the commissioners collected from children working in Belfast cotton and linen mills.

Mill girls in Belfast, 1830s

26

Catherine Macaulay, ten years old. Says that she has worked for two years in the spinning-room, and is greatly troubled with a pain in her head, which she never had before she came into the mill. Says she cannot write.



Marcella Robinson, aged eleven.

28

Likes it very well. Was never tired when they worked twelve hours. Nobody has beat her since she came, and she never saw any other little girl beat. Can read a little; can't write. It is too late when the mill stops to go to an evening school . . . When they were working twelve hours, she earned 2s. [10p] per week; and now, when they work only eight hours, she gets 1s. 2d. [6p]. She would sooner be working twelve hours.

Sarah Pollock, aged twelve.

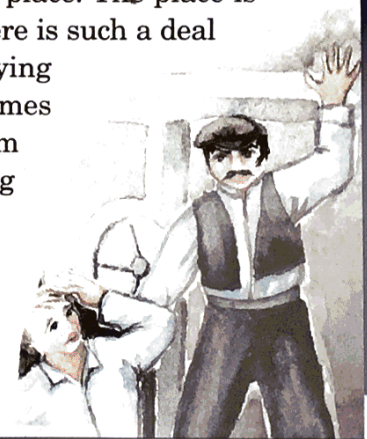
27

Can't say that she is very tired, but she would like to have a shorter time to work, even if she were to get less wages for it. Two or three slaps on the side of the head is the most she ever got, when she has been late with her share (of the bobbins). Can read. Has never written since she left the day-school four years ago. She usually gets up at four o'clock. She is glad that she has been sent to the mill, for "she earns her mother money".

Robert Laird, aged fourteen.

29

Doesn't like the mill very much. Doesn't think it is a very wholesome place. The place is very stuffy, and there is such a deal of fluff and dust flying through it. Sometimes has got a clout from his master; nothing more than that. Can read; can't write. Goes to the evening school generally.



WRITE ABOUT



Copy out the grid and summarise the evidence to be found in these sources.

	Catherine	Sarah	Marcella	Robert
Age at present?				
Do they enjoy their work?				
Have they been beaten?				
Do they go to school?				
Can they read?				
Can they write?				
Do they want to work longer hours?				

Is there anything about the evidence of these children which surprises you?

There were a few factory owners who cared about their workers and who built, on country sites, model factories and model villages which provided schools and good housing. This was very rare, however, and most workers were employed by rich manufacturers who were only interested in keeping their machines operating around the clock at as low a cost as possible.

Government reports, and **campaigns** by people like Lord Shaftesbury who were concerned about the effects upon children of long hours of work and no schooling, resulted in changes being made. These **reforms** were put in place throughout the rest of the century and working conditions for men, women and children gradually improved.

In the 1840s laws were passed which said that children under 9 years of age were not allowed to work for more than 6 hours a day, and they were to have 3 hours a day at school. These children were called **half-timers**.



Lord Shaftesbury,
1801-1885

HALF-TIMERS

Half-timers had to obtain a Certificate of Attendance. If their attendance at school was irregular they were not allowed to work the following week. Sometimes these children had not been to school at all until they began to work in the mill, and they were on average about 4 years behind children who had been lucky enough to attend school full time.

Half-timers were often separated from the other pupils not just because they were behind in reading and writing but because of the smell they brought with them from the mill.



The 1870 Powis Report on education describes the day-to-day existence of half-timers.

30 Where half-time children are employed there are two sets of them working the day but it is the morning set only to which I shall refer. Many of them living a few hundred yards away from the mill, must rise during all states of the weather, both winter and summer, at 5.45 a.m. at the latest to be at the mill and at work at 6.00 a.m. They then work until breakfast time at 8.15 a.m, go home to breakfast (probably bread and tea), return at 8.45 a.m. and work till 12 noon in a moist and heated atmosphere . . . At 12 they are permitted to go home to "take a piece", that is, a morsel of treacle and bread, or dry bread in their hands, eating it as they hurry to school, where they remain till 3 and then go home to dinner, that is, potatoes and buttermilk when they can get it, often prepared for them by a child younger than themselves because the mother is working in the factory, or dry bread again.

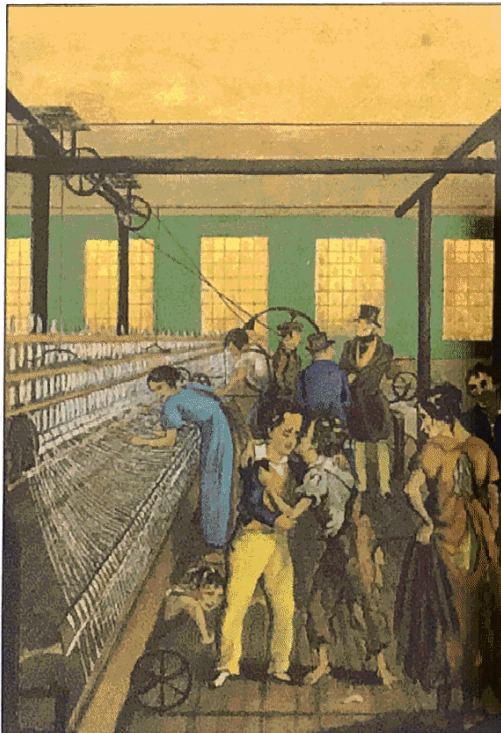
The Powis Report also tells us what half-timers looked like.

31 The afternoon set come to school in a state of personal dirt and squalor, which makes mixing with them very unpleasant. The room is filled with the stink of the flax oil; the children's faces are smeared with the oil and dust which sticks to their fingers after their work; their scanty ragged clothing, with an old shawl thrown over their shoulders to protect them from the rain, makes them look different from the other children who dislike them.

WRITE ABOUT



- Using these extracts from the Powis Report, make a timetable of the half-timer's day.
- Imagine that you are one of the children in the school who did **not** work in the mill. Describe one of the half-timers who arrives from work at midday and say how you feel about him or her joining your class.



The improvements in working conditions came about very slowly. Government inspectors were given the job of checking that factory owners obeyed the new laws. It was not until 1901 that children under 12 were not allowed by law to work for a living.

STREET TRADERS

Not all town children found work in the factories and mills and many had to work in the streets. We can find out about the many kinds of jobs they did from sources like newspapers and government reports.



An orphan flower-seller, aged 11

Here are some extracts from a government report on street trading in Belfast in 1908, shortly after Victoria's reign ended.

32 We estimate that there are between 300 and 400 children selling papers every morning on the streets of Belfast. A few sell laces and matches. There are about 50 or 60 girls in Belfast engaged largely as flower sellers. A lot of boys are engaged in hawking sticks. Other boys are employed by merchants to deliver messages, some sell laces and studs. Some of these children do not attend school at all, but work from 8 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock at night.

The paper sellers annoy the public so much by shouting and wrestling and they have a system of jostling people in the streets to sell their papers: they jump into tramcars, and are a very great nuisance about restaurants, hotels, clubs and places of public resort. They get into the doorways of offices, and will hardly move out, even for the owners.

I have seen these poor little things, especially on Saturday evenings, out very very late, and they with hardly enough clothing to cover their nakedness. Many of the deaths from consumption [tuberculosis] are among children who are out in all weathers.

What do they do with their earnings? They hand them over to their parents.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Dr Thomas John Barnardo from Dublin was so concerned about the plight of destitute children that he founded the first of his famous homes in east London in 1870. By 1900, 8,000 children were in his care.



A match girl, aged 8



Crossing sweepers, like these boys aged 8 and 10, cleared away the horse manure that covered Victorian streets.

DOMESTIC SERVANTS

In Victorian times, most upper-class and middle-class people kept servants. Wealthy households like the one at Castle Ward had lots of servants to do different jobs but less wealthy households would sometimes employ just one girl to do everything – the **maid-of-all-work**.

Mrs Isabella Beeton (1836–1865) was regarded as an expert on cookery and house management. Victorians were very influenced by her books, from which we can get a good idea of the kind of work servants had to do. These are the chores that Molly, a maid, had to do before breakfast.

“The general servant, or maid-of-all-work, deserves our pity. Her life is a solitary one, and in some places her work is never done. She has to rise with the lark, for she has to do in her own person all the work which in larger houses is performed by cook, kitchen-maid, and housemaid.

Mrs Beeton, 1860

MOLLY'S MORNING

“My duties begin by opening the shutters of all the lower rooms in the house; I then brush up the kitchen-range, light the fire, clear away the ashes, clean the hearth, and polish with a leather the bright parts of the range. I need to be as quick as I can. After putting on the kettle, I then go to the dining-room to get it in order for breakfast. I first roll up the rug, take up the fender, shake and fold up the tablecloth, then sweep the room, carrying the dirt towards the fireplace; I then lay a coarse cloth over the carpet and I clean the grate. When the grate is finished, the ashes cleared away, the hearth cleaned, and the fender put back in its place, I have to dust the furniture, and if there are any ornaments or things on the sideboard, I must not dust round them, but lift them out on to another place, dust well where they have been standing, and then replace the things. After the rug is put down, the tablecloth arranged, and everything in order, I lay the cloth for breakfast, and then shut the dining-room door.

The hall must now be swept, the mats shaken, the door-step cleaned, and any brass knockers or handles polished up with the leather. The family's boots must now be cleaned. I then have to wash my hands and face, put on a clean white apron, and be ready for my mistress when she comes downstairs.

Then I carry the urn into the dining-room, where my mistress will make the tea or coffee, and sometimes will boil the eggs. In the meantime I cook the bacon, kidneys, fish, etc . . .

adapted from Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*



WRITE ABOUT



Going into **domestic service**, as this type of work was called, often led to a life of drudgery.

Servants had to live in the homes of their employers, so that they would be there to do work at any time of the day or night. Their wages were very low and they had very little time off.



- Count the number of chores which Molly had to do before breakfast.
- At what time do you think she had to get up?
- Compare Molly's work with what needs to be done in a modern house.
- If you had been the child of very poor parents in Belfast in Victorian times, would you rather have worked in a mill or been a servant? Give reasons for your choice.

HIRED FARM SERVANTS

Paddy Gallagher from Donegal was sent to the Strabane hiring fair in the 1880s. This is what he remembers about that time.

35 When I was ten years of age I could not wait. My father had not enough money to pay the rent and the shop's debts. It was the same with the neighbours. A crowd of us boys were got ready for the hiring fair at Strabane.

I'll always mind the morning I first left home. I think I see my mother as she handed me my four shillings for the journey. She was crying. She kissed me again and again . . . We were all barefooted; we had our boots in our bundles . . .

When we reached Strabane we all huddled together, until the farmers made us walk up and down to see how we were set up and judge what mettle was in us. Anybody who looked tired or faulty in any way was passed over. The strong boys were picked up quickly and I was getting scared I would be left . . .

Then a farmer came up to me and made me walk up and down. "How much do you want for six months?" he said. I said, "Three pounds ten." I heard him whispering to another fellow, "He is wee, but the neck is good", and he then offered me two pounds ten.

The other man caught both our hands in his, hit our hands a slap, and said, "Bought and sold for three pounds." We both agreed.

Some poor country people who had many children were not able to feed them all, so as soon as the children were about 8 or 9 years old, they were sent to the **hiring fair** in the hope that they would get a live-in job with a farmer. If they were hired at the fair, they had to agree to stay with the farmer for 6 months. Hiring fairs were held in market towns, usually in May and November. Men and women were hired as well as children.

Children who were hired by farmers would have fed the animals, milked the cows, helped with the churning of butter, lifted stones from the fields, planted seeds and set potatoes, weeded and hoed, picked potatoes, tied and stacked sheaves of corn, cut turf and made hay. They would have herded animals and dug and pulped turnips for animal feed. Girls would also have done household chores. Some children had good living quarters and ate with the family; others slept in draughty barns or attics and were fed the same food as the animals.

For many boys and girls their 6 months' work with a farmer was a time of loneliness and long hours of hard, heavy labour but some people had happy memories of being hired.

WRITE ABOUT



- Why did Paddy and his friends have to leave their homes in Donegal and go to the hiring fair at Strabane?
- Why do you think the children were keen to go to be hired?
- What phrase in Paddy's account shows us that farmers chose a child to be hired in much the same way as they would have chosen an animal at the fair?
- Why did farmers in Victorian times need a lot more farm workers than they do today?
- Pretend you have to go a hiring fair. Make up a short drama about it.

This is how one old man looked back.

36 I have never regretted having come to the employment of this farmer. He was an honest, hardworking man who readily appreciated a boy who was interested in farming and willing to work. I took great pride in the knowledge I acquired at this farm.

SOURCE

TALK ABOUT



- Look back over the different kinds of work children had to do in Victorian times. Imagine a conversation between Catherine, the mill girl, Molly, the house maid, and Paddy, the farm worker. What would they say about each other's work?



Ballymoney hiring fair, around 1900