

# LIVING IN THE PAST

## VICTORIAN CHILDREN AT WORK



### Victorian Britain

Queen Victoria ruled the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland for more than 63 years. The period of her reign was from 1837 to 1901 and is known as the Victorian Age. During this time the United Kingdom became the largest empire ever! Our Queen ruled a quarter of the World's population and a fifth of earth's land.

At this time there were huge developments in science and technology as well as daily life. Manchester saw massive population growth, while London's population doubled, Manchester's trebled! With this came the demand for work.

### Children at Work

For hundreds of years children had worked. But with the increased demand for work during the Victorian era and industrial revolution came more and more demanding roles for children to fulfill. Many were used as cheap labour. Working long hours, children were often treated badly. Children started work as young as four or five years old. A young child could not earn much, but even a few pence would be enough to buy food.

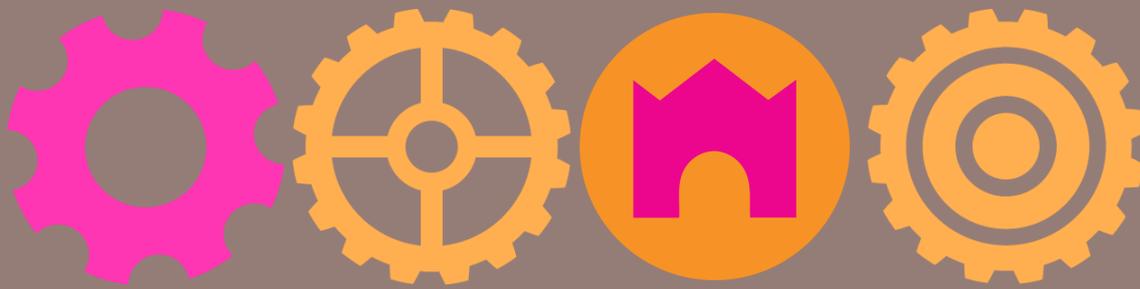
### Why did children go to work?

Many Victorian children were poor and worked to help their families. This was not unusual during these times and not seen at all as cruel. You had to work to receive money and people thought work was good for children. The industrial revolution created new jobs, in factories and mines. Many of these jobs were at first done by children, as it was cheaper to pay a child than an adult.

### What jobs did children do?

Children worked on farms, in homes as servants, and in factories. Children provided a variety of skills and would do jobs that were as varied as needing to be small and work as a scavenger in a cotton mill to having to push heavy coal trucks along tunnels in coal mines. There were so many different jobs! Boys went to sea, as boy-sailors, and girls went 'into service' as housemaids. In towns and cities, you might have been a chimney sweep or a crossing boy, sweeping the roads clean of horse dung from the horse and carriage. Others worked on the streets, selling things such as flowers, matches and ribbons. Children considered themselves to be lucky if they received an apprenticeship in a trade, the not so lucky ones worked on farms or helped with the spinning. With the development of industry came new jobs, and it was normal to use children for work that adults couldn't do, crawling underneath machinery or sitting in coal mines to open and close the ventilation doors.





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### Coal Mines

Coal was the main source of power. The coal mines were dangerous places where roofs sometimes caved in, explosions happened and workers got all sorts of injuries. There were very few safety rules. Cutting and moving coal, which today is done by machines, was done by men, women and children. The younger children often worked as 'trappers' who worked trap doors within the ventilation shaft. They sat in a hole hollowed out for them and held a string which was fastened to the door. When they heard the coal wagons coming they had to open the door by pulling the string. This job was one of the easiest in the mine but it was very lonely and the place where they sat was usually damp and draughty. Older children might be employed as 'coal bearers' carrying loads of coal on their backs in big baskets. 'Drawers' would pull truck-loads of coal to the pit surface using heavy chains attached to their waist.

The coal industry in Tameside was at its height in the mid-nineteenth century, with the main centres being in Ashton-under-Lyne, Denton, Dukinfield and Hyde. However, mining declined rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century because they had either been worked out or had become unprofitable. By 1906 only the Denton and Ashton Moss Colliery remained. Denton mine closed in 1929 while Ashton Moss survived until 1959.

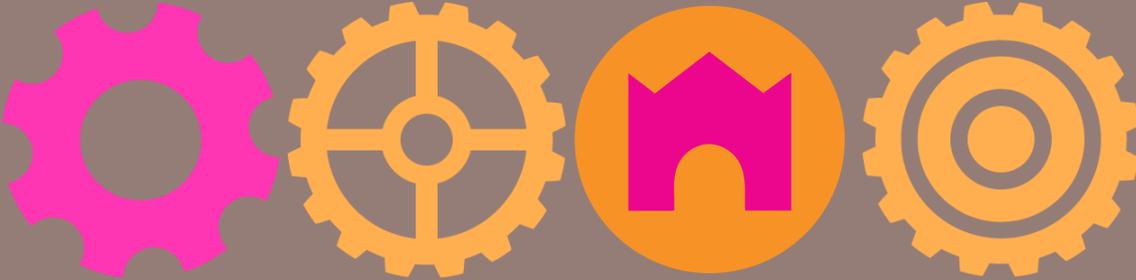
As the coal industry expanded in the eighteenth century the problems of flooding and poor ventilation made it difficult to mine at great depths. However, in the early nineteenth century, improvements in technology allowed mines to go deeper.

**Did you know?** At 640 metres, Astley Deep Pit in Dukinfield was the deepest mine in the country at the time it was dug.

**Did you know?** The Mines Act was passed by the Government in 1842 forbidding the employment of women and girls. Later it became illegal for a boy under 12 to work down a mine.

**Did you know?** The average wage in the 1850s was about 15 shillings (75p) a week. Many children got just 5 shillings (25p) a week, or less.





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### Mills

While thousands of children worked down the mine, thousands of others worked in the cotton mills. The mill owners often took in orphans to their workhouses; they lived at the mill and were worked as hard as possible.

Cotton mills were dangerous places to work. Mills were also hot, humid, dusty and extremely noisy. With little ventilation, cotton dust caused eye infections, breathing problems and stomach complaints. Workers spent long hours tending fast moving machinery which resulted in many serious accidents.

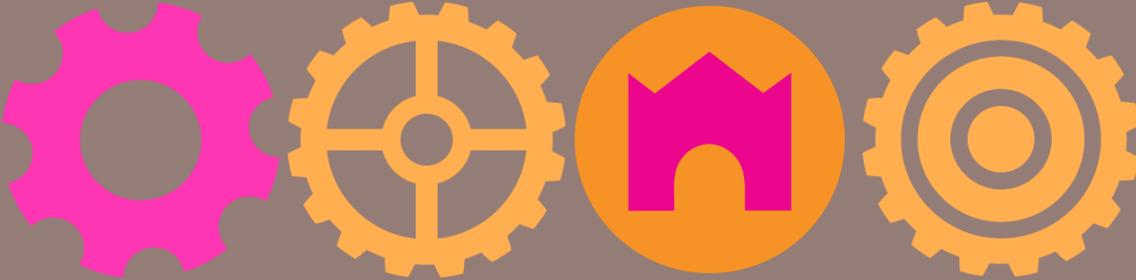
Children were especially at risk. Children as young as seven years old could be found working fourteen hours a day in the region's mills. Being small and nimble, they were given dangerous jobs such as climbing underneath moving machinery to remove any cotton pieces that had fallen below - this role was called being a 'scavenger'. They spent most of their time at the machines with little time for fresh air or exercise. Even part of Sunday was spent at the mill cleaning machines. There were some serious accidents where children lost their hair when it was caught in the machine, hands could be crushed and some children were killed when they went to sleep and fell into the machine.

During the 1800s Tameside emerged as one of the most important textile producers in the world. The industrial revolution saw hundreds of large, steam-powered cotton mills spring up across the borough's nine towns. Raw cotton was shipped in from the United States where it was woven into cotton cloth. The finished cloth was then exported to markets across the globe.

The textile industry was the biggest employer in the region. By 1861 a third of the population in Ashton-under-Lyne was directly employed in textiles. In Stalybridge the figure was even higher. Often whole families worked in the mills and their livelihood depended on the state of the cotton trade.

The textile industry was vulnerable to trade depressions. The Cotton Famine of 1861-1864 was the worst of these, when the supply of raw cotton from the United States was cut off during the American Civil War. Many local mills closed, and cotton workers and their families lost their livelihoods. The industry slowly recovered in the 1870s and began to expand again. However, after the First World War, cheap imports began to destroy local textile production. The industry continued, but by the 1960s the region had lost its role as 'Clothier of the World'.





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### Farm Work

Eighteenth century farms in Tameside were devoted almost entirely to dairy, beef or sheep farming. Corn, hay, and root crops were grown for animal feed, although local farmers also kept a few pigs and chickens and grew other crops for their own use or to sell at market. Many farmers topped up their income by hand loom weaving or hatting.

As Tameside became industrialised, more and more people left farms to work in towns. But farming was still important and the growing population needed feeding. There were advances in technology, including improved breeds, better drainage and the introduction of chemical fertilisers. Market gardens were established on Ashton Moss to produce fruit and vegetables for the region's towns.

Poor families who lived in the countryside would also send their children out to work. There would have been many roles and duties, both for adults and children. Some of the children's roles included guarding the animals, sowing and picking potatoes and other crops, as well as taking the livestock to market. They would fill sacks and collect firewood. As they became young adults they would have more physical tasks, including ploughing the fields. During harvest time everyone had to work together to get the job done.

Seven and eight year olds could work as bird scarers, out in the fields from four in the morning until seven at night, stopping briefly for a lunch of bread and sometimes they would receive cheese. For tea they would have bread again or potato and if they were lucky they might have some bacon.

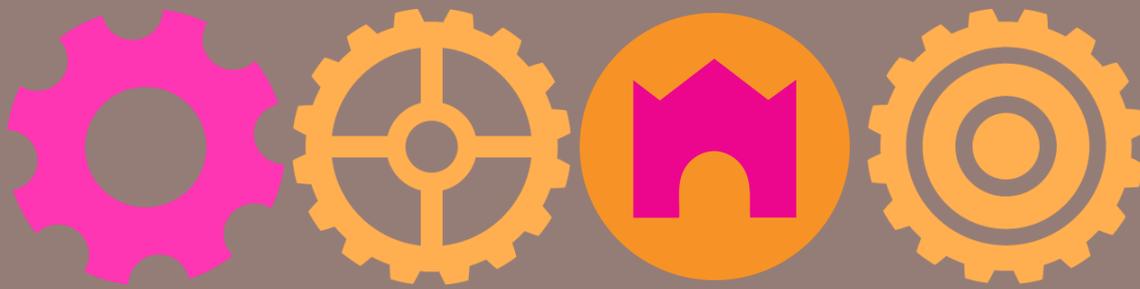
### Service

All upper class houses had several servants, and most middle class households would have at least one or two. In 1871 over 4% of the population was employed 'in service', the majority of them being women. Roles included butler, housekeeper, valet, footman, lady's maid, house maids, under housemaids, laundry maid, cook, kitchen maids, scullery maid, house boy, coachman, groom and stable boy.

Servants were ranked in importance with each having their own skills and duties. Children's main roles would be the house maid, under house maid, laundry maid, kitchen maid, scullery maid, house boy and stable boy.

The main duties of the house maid were cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. First thing, the breakfast room, boudoir and drawing room needed to be cleaned; they would also iron the newspaper so it was nice and crisp for the master of the house to read during breakfast.





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While the family ate breakfast the house maid's attention would be on the bedrooms; opening windows, turning and making the beds, chamber pot to be emptied, floors wiped, and woodwork dusted. The rugs were taken out and shaken, mirrors polished, the grate and irons cleaned. They also had weekly duties which would include cleaning windows, washing ornaments, polishing furniture, cleaning the stairs, landing and corridors, mending linen, taking down curtains then shaking and rehangng, cleaning rugs and cushions.

**Quote:** "I start work promptly at 5:00 in the morning and work all day till 9:00 at night. That's 16 hours! We are not allowed to talk, sit or look out of the window whilst we work. The only day off from work I get is on Sundays, when we have to go to church." **Girl aged 9**

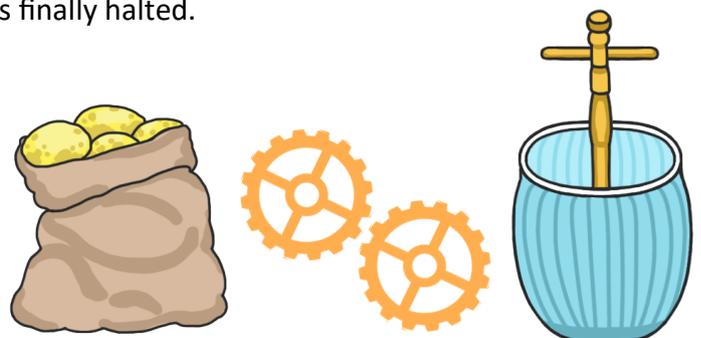
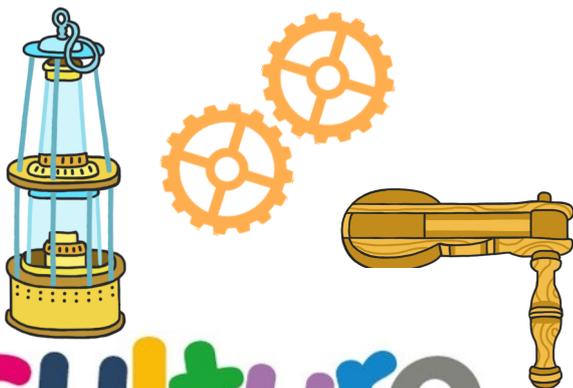
**Did you know?** John and George Mayall from Mossley started working from the age of seven in a woollen mill in Uppermill. By 1876 they ran Britannia Mill in Mossley, the largest privately owned cotton spinning firm in the world. John Mayall lived at Highfield House and his brother George built a beautiful hall called 'Whitehall' later to become the home of his son Edmund and family. Both households would have had a host of servants to help them with their day to day life.



### Changes for the better

It took time for the government to decide that working children should be protected by laws as many didn't see anything wrong with the idea of children earning their keep. They felt parents had a right to send their children out to work. People worked hard to persuade the public that it was wrong for children to suffer health problems and to miss out on schooling due to work.

Legislation was gradually introduced during the nineteenth century to limit child labour. In 1844 the 'Half Time System' was introduced, ensuring that children spent half of each working day at school. But it was not until the early twentieth century that child labour was finally halted.



**culture**

Tameside

**Tameside**  
Metropolitan Borough

