

# The life of the child mill worker



Conditions in the mills for children (and their parents) were harsh. People regularly worked a 12-14 hour day doing physically demanding work, many of whom were children and women, as they were cheaper to employ than men. By 1799, as many as one third of factory workers were pauper apprentices. In Sutton, many children from London were brought to work in Sutton Mill, in return for food and lodgings.

**Children often did the most repetitive and tiring jobs in the mills, such as:**

**Doffing:** taking a full bobbin off the spindles and putting on an empty one.

**Piecing:** repairing broken threads on spinning machines.

**Cleaning and oiling the machines:** often whilst they were still moving (even though this was against the law).<sup>1</sup>

1. <http://newlanark.org>



# Child labour in the factories - two schools of thought

## What the optimists thought

- Employing children is necessary for production to run smoothly and for products to remain competitive
- Children can earn money in the mills (and other factories) that their families would otherwise not have had
- Factory work builds a child's character.
- Working in the factories is no harder than the work that children did before in the cottages, on farms and up chimneys
- Child labour prevents idleness and vice

### John Wesley

John Wesley was a devout Christian. He had a tremendous work ethic and believed other people should lead a disciplined life and abstain from alcohol.

Although opposed to slave labour, Wesley argued that child labour prevented idleness and vice.



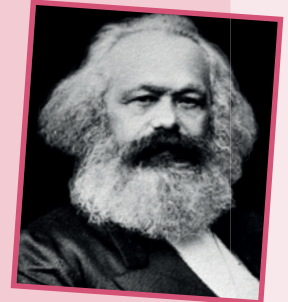
## What the pessimists thought

- Children work in deplorable conditions which is bad for their health
- Child labour is an example of rich people in capitalist society - the industrialists (such as factory owners) taking advantage of the poor
- There should be better regulation of mills to improve the health of all workers
- Children should be given the opportunity to learn the three Rs: reading, writing and 'rithmetic (maths), and also learn the bible

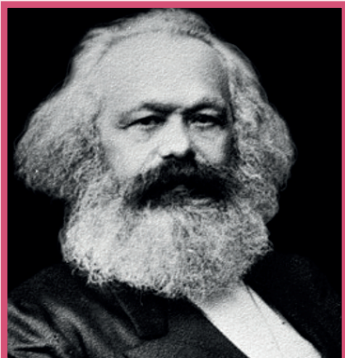
### Karl Marx

Karl Marx was a famous philosopher. He wrote about the wealthy capitalists who owned the factories and the proletariat, who were the workers.

He developed the theory of communism which is the idea of all property (and wealth) being equally shared out.



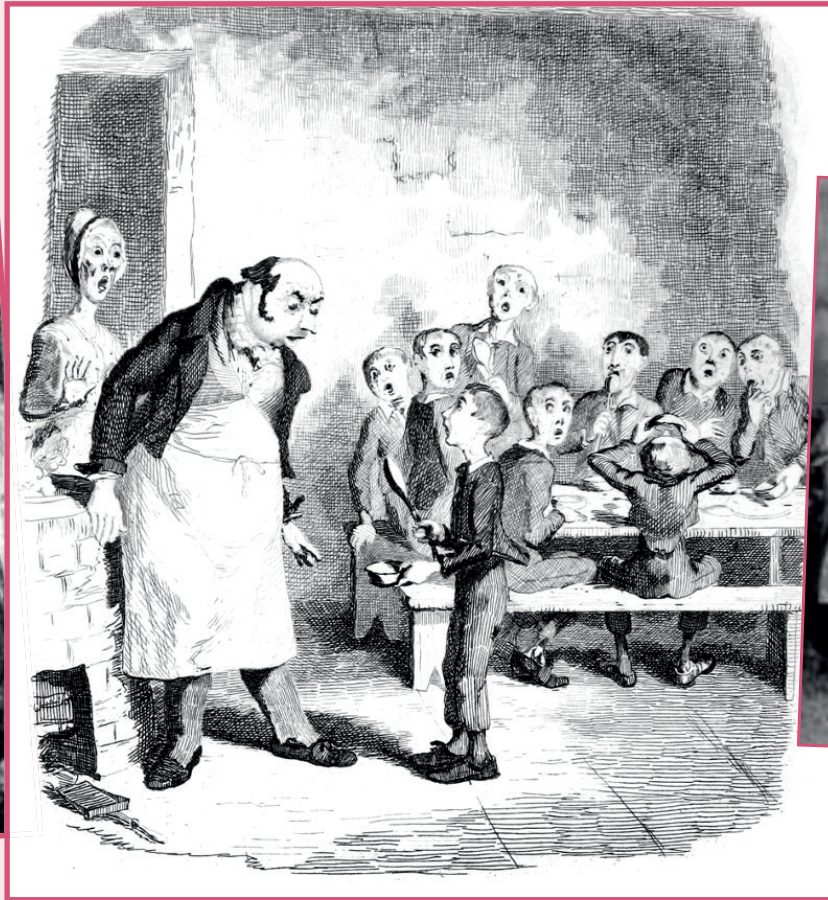
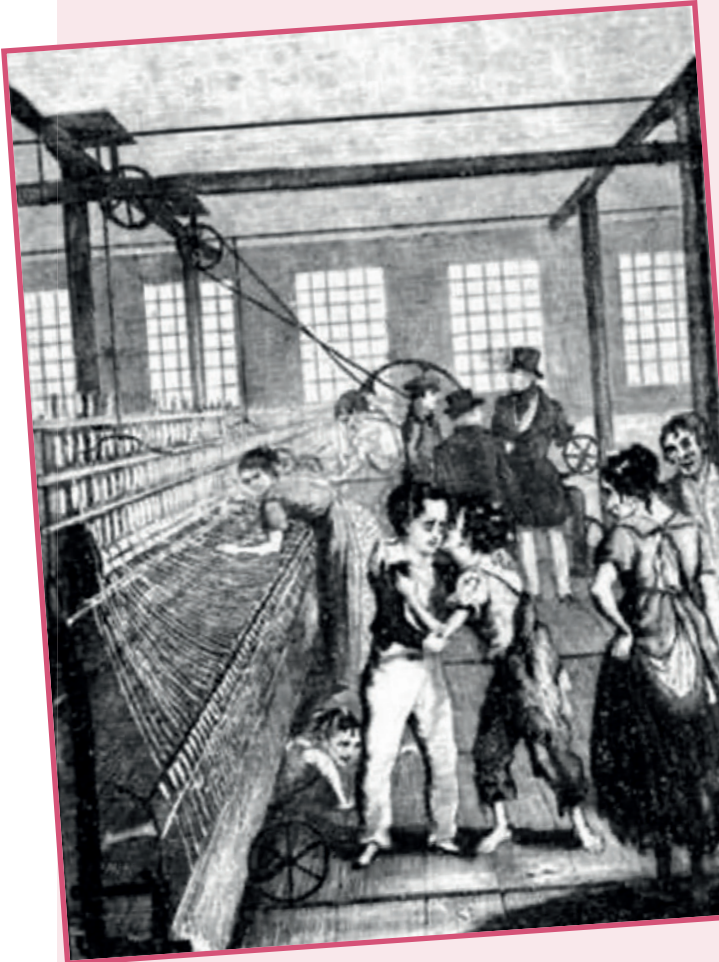
# Child labour in the factories - two schools of thought



**Karl Marx**

**“Accumulation of wealth at one pole is at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole.”**

# Images of child mill workers





# Conditions in the mills Page 1

**A committee was set up to examine evidence of the conditions of child workers in the mills in 1832. Michael Sadler interviewed 89 witnesses, including supervisors in the mills as well as child labourers themselves. Following are extracts from these witness statements:**

## **Abraham Whitehead, a clothier from Huddersfield, Yorkshire**

I am a clothier, and reside at Scholes, near Holmfirth, which is the centre of very considerable woollen mills for three or four miles. I live near the centre of thirty or forty of them, and have had constant opportunity of observing the manner in which these mills are regulated and conducted, and I have observed them for at least the last twenty years.

The youngest age at which children are employed is never under five, some are employed between five and six as pieceners. I have seen them at work in the summer season between nine and ten in the evening - they continue to work as long as they can see, and they can see to work as long in these mills as you could see to read.

I have been in mills at all hours, and I never in my life saw the machinery stopped at breakfast time at any of the mills. The children get their breakfast as they can - they eat and work - there is generally a pot of water-porridge, with a little treacle in it, placed at the end of the machine, and when they have exerted themselves to get a little forward with their work, they take a few spoonfuls for a minute or two, and then to work again, and continue to do so until they have finished their breakfast. This is the general practice not only of the children, but of the men, in the woollen mills in the district.

There is not any allowance for the afternoon refreshment, more than for breakfast. In summer, some of the mills allow an hour for dinner, and others, forty minutes. There is no time allowed in winter, only just sufficient to eat their dinner. The children are employed as pieceners; they, when at work, are always on their feet — they cannot sit and piece.

The children are generally cruelly treated. It is a very difficult thing to go into a mill in the latter part of the day, particularly in winter, and not to hear some of the children crying for being beaten.



# Conditions in the mills Page 2

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## James Peterson, a mill overseer from Dundee, Scotland

I reside at Dundee, I have been acquainted with the mill system in Dundee and neighbourhood for a long time. At ten years of age I entered a mill. I worked in the carding-room, which was very dusty. There were fourteen hours' actual work, and fifteen hours a-day confinement, including meals. I suffered from shortness and stoppage at the breast and was forced to leave in consequence. Other children were similarly affected.

I worked at a mill in Duntmin; there we worked as long as we could see in summertime, and I could not say at what hour it was we stopped. There was nobody but the master and the master's son had a watch, and we did not know the time. The operatives were not permitted to have a watch. There was one man who had a watch. I believe it was a friend who gave it to him; it was taken from him and given into the master's custody, because he had told the men the time of the day. There was no clock at that mill.

There were a great many children in proportion to the number of adults, most of them were orphans. There was a part of them that came from Edinburgh, and a part of them from Perth. There were some of the orphan children from Edinburgh who had been in the mill, I believe, from four to five years.

When the hands worked those long hours, the master came himself and roused them in the morning, and those that would not rise, I have seen him take a pail of water and throw it upon them, to make them rise."



# Conditions in the mills Page 3

HM\_L4HO4

## Joseph Hebergam, a mill worker from Huddersfield, Yorkshire

I reside at Northgate, Huddersfield, in Yorkshire. I was seven years of age when I began to work at Bradley Mill, near Huddersfield; the employment was worsted spinning. The hours of labour at that mill were from five in the morning till eight at night, with an interval for rest and refreshment of thirty minutes, at noon; there was no time for rest and refreshment in the afternoon. We had to eat our meals as we could, standing or otherwise.

I had fourteen and a-half hours' actual labour when seven years of age; the wages I then received was two shillings and sixpence per week. I attended to what are called the throstle machines; this I did for two years and a half, and then I went to the steam looms for half-a-year. In that mill there were about fifty children, of about the same age as I was. These children were often sick and poorly. There were always, perhaps, half-a-dozen regularly that were ill because of excessive labour. The work was not very hard, but having to work so very many hours made it worse; it was rather hard of itself, but it would have been better if we had not had so long to stand.

## Witness name unknown

One part of the discipline of those mills is profound silence. They will not allow the children to speak.

Imagine the pitiful condition of those little ones, not even allowed to speak for all these long hours! But the masters of this factory were swindlers as well as ruffians. Out of the thirty minutes allowed for dinner, five minutes and sometimes ten were occupied in cleaning the spindles.

## Benjamin Gummersil, Mill worker from Bradford, Yorkshire

I reside in Bowling Lane, Bradford, in Yorkshire, and am now sixteen years of age. I have been employed in piecening at a worsted mill. The hours of labour were from six in the morning to seven, and half-past seven and eight at night; half an hour was allowed at noon for dinner—not any time was allowed for breakfast or 'drinking.' As a child, I found the employment hard and laborious. I entered the mill at nine years of age: my father was obliged to send me to the mill in order to keep me. If we are higher than the frames, we have to bend our bodies and our legs. I was a healthy and strong boy before I went to the mill. When eight years old I could walk from Leeds to Bradford without any pain or difficulty and did not in consequence feel much fatigue. I had worked about a year for those long hours before I found my limbs begin to fail. The failing came on with great pain in my legs and knees; I felt very much fatigued towards the end of those days — then the overlooker beat me up to my work. After I became deformed, I did not get on so well with my work as I could before. I got less in height. I cannot exactly say how tall I am now. I have fallen several inches in height. I had to stand thirteen or fourteen hours a day frequently and was constantly engaged as I have described.



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## Elizabeth Bentley, a mill worker from Leeds

I am twenty-three years of age and live at Leeds. I began to work at Mr. Busk's flax mill when I was six years old. I was then a little 'doffer.' In that mill we worked from five in the morning till nine at night when they were 'throng'; when they were not so 'throng,' the usual hours of labour were from six in the morning till seven at night. I consider 'doffing' to be a laborious employment. When the frames are full, the 'doffers' have to stop them, and take the 'flyers' off and take the full bobbins off, and carry them to the roller, and then put empty ones on, and set the frame going again. I was kept constantly on my feet; there were so many frames, and they ran so quick, the labour was excessive, there was not time for anything.

I worked in the card room; it was so dusty that the dust got upon my lungs, and the work was so hard.





# Robert Owen: An address to the inhabitants of New Lanark

Page 1

Robert Owen (1771 -1858) was one of the key people behind factory reform. He created a model community in New Lanark in Scotland. He made a famous speech on the opening of his Institute for the Formation of Character on January 1, 1816.

Below are a few extracts from that speech which highlight his philosophy and the improved living conditions and lifestyle of his factory workers, which aimed to foster better habits and behaviour.

Within the speech he reinforced his beliefs that every person's character is influenced by those around them; that good habits can be learned; that people can produce more than they consume (use up) and that people can be happy without doing bad things (also known as vices) and finally, that by changing the way people viewed those living in poverty at the time fewer people would live in misery.

Within his speech Robert called upon other manufacturers to see the 'substantial advantages' of his new community and called upon the government to change the law to bring about similar benefits to the whole population.

**The full transcript can be read here:**

<https://infed.org/mobi/an-address-to-the-inhabitants-of-new-lanark/>



# Robert Owen: An address to the inhabitants of New Lanark

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Long before I came to reside among you, it had been my chief study to discover the extent, causes, and remedy of the inconveniences and miseries which were perpetually recurring to every class in society.

...My mind at a very early period took a similar direction; and I became ardently desirous of investigating to its source a subject which involved the happiness of every human being.

...The principles, however, upon which the new system is founded, lead to a very different conduct. They make it evident, that when men are in poverty, when they commit crimes or actions injurious to themselves and others, and when they are in a state of wretchedness, there must be substantial causes for these lamentable effects; and that, instead of punishing or being angry with our fellow-men because they have been subjected to such a miserable existence, we ought to pity and commiserate them, and patiently to trace the causes whence the evils proceed, and endeavour to discover whether they may not be removed.

But from this day a change must take place; a new era must commence; the human intellect, through the whole extent of the earth, hitherto enveloped by the grossest

ignorance and superstition, must begin to be released from its state of darkness; nor shall nourishment henceforth be given to the seeds of disunion and division among men. For the time is come, when the means may be prepared to train all the nations of the world men of every colour and climate, of the most diversified habits in that knowledge which shall impel them not only to love but to be actively kind to each other in the whole of their conduct, without a single exception.

This Institution, when all its parts shall be completed, is intended to produce permanently beneficial effects; and, instead of longer applying temporary expedients for correcting some of your most prominent external habits, to effect a complete and thorough improvement in the internal as well as external character of the whole village. For this purpose the Institution has been devised to afford the means of receiving your children at an early age, as soon almost as they can walk.

...The middle room of the story below will be appropriated to their accommodation; and in this their chief occupation will be to play and amuse themselves in severe weather: at other times they will be permitted to occupy the enclosed area before the building; for, to give children a vigorous constitution, they ought to be kept as much as possible in

# Robert Owen: An address to the inhabitants of New Lanark

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the open air. As they advance in years, they will be taken into the rooms on the right and left, where they will be regularly instructed in the rudiments of common learning; which, before they shall be six years old, they may be taught in a superior manner...

For the benefit of the health and spirits of the children both boys and girls will be taught to dance, and the boys will be instructed in military exercises; those of each sex who may have good voices will be taught to sing, and those among the boys who have a taste for music will be taught to play upon some instrument; for it is intended to give them as much diversified innocent amusement as the local circumstances of the establishment will admit.

The rooms to the east and west on the story below, will also be appropriated in bad weather for relaxation and exercise during some part of the day, to the children who, in the regular hours of teaching, are to be instructed in these apartments.

In this manner is the Institution to be occupied during the day in winter. In summer, it is intended that they shall derive knowledge from a personal examination of the works of nature and of art, by going out frequently with some of their masters into the neighbourhood and country around.

After the instruction of the children who are too young to attend the works shall have been finished for the day, the apartments shall be cleaned, ventilated, and in winter lighted and heated, and in all respects made comfortable, for the reception of other classes of the population. The apartments on this floor are then to be appropriated for the use of the children and youth of both sexes who have been employed at work during the day, and who may wish still further to improve themselves in reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing, or knitting; or to learn any of the useful arts: to instruct them in which, proper masters and mistresses, who are appointed, will attend for two hours every evening.

The three lower rooms, which in winter will also be well lighted and properly heated, will be thrown open for the use of the adult part of the population, who are to be provided with every accommodation requisite to enable them to read, write, account, sew, or play, converse, or walk about. But strict order and attention to the happiness of every one of the party will be enforced, until such habits shall be acquired as will render any formal restriction unnecessary; and the measures thus adopted will soon remove such necessity.

# Robert Owen: An address to the inhabitants of New Lanark

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Two evenings in the week will be appropriated to dancing and music: but on these occasions every accommodation will be prepared for those who prefer to study or to follow any of the occupations pursued on the other evenings.

That charity and that kindness admit of no exception. They extend to every child of man, however he may have been taught, however he may have been trained. They consider not what country gave him birth, what may be his complexion, what his habits or his sentiments.

....In short, my friends, the New System is founded on principles which will enable mankind to prevent, in the rising generation, almost all, if not all of the evils and miseries which we and our forefathers have experienced...

None will have cause to complain; for each will possess, without injury to another, all that can tend to his comfort, his well-being, and his happiness. Such will be the certain consequences of the introduction into practice of that system for which I have been silently preparing the way for upwards of five-and-twenty years.

...Will you not, then, have charity for the habits and opinions of all men, of even the very worst human beings that your imaginations can conceive? Will you not, then, be sincerely kind to them, and actively endeavour to do them good? Will you not patiently bear with, and commiserate, their defects and infirmities, and consider them as your relatives and friends?

If you will not, if you cannot do this, and persevere to the end of your days in doing it, you have not charity; you cannot have religion; you possess not even common justice; you are ignorant of yourselves, and are destitute of every particle of useful and valuable knowledge respecting human nature.

Until you act after this manner, it is impossible that you can ever enjoy full happiness yourselves, or make others happy.

## Source Reference

Owen, R. (1816) An Address to the Inhabitants of New Lanark, London.

Available in the informal education archives:

[http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/owen\\_new\\_lanark.htm](http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/owen_new_lanark.htm).

In the encyclopedia: Ian Donnachie's Education in Robert Owen's new society: the New Lanark institute and schools.

Reference: Cole, G. D. H. (1927) 'Introduction' to Robert Owen A New View of Society and other writings, London: Dent.

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