

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 for MailOnline](#)

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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.'



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Another young hurrier, Patience Kershaw, had a bald patch on her head from years of pushing carts - often with her scalp pressed against them - for 11 miles a day underground. 'Sometimes they [the miners] beat me if I am not quick enough,' she said.

The inspector described her as a 'filthy, ragged, and deplorable-looking object'.

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.'

His master threatened to 'knock out his brains' if he did not get up to work, and pushed him to the ground, breaking his thigh. Eventually, bent double and crippled, he returned to the workhouse, no longer any use to the brute.

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, while her inventors devised ingenious machinery to push productivity ever higher.

But, as a new book by Jane Humphries, a professor of economic history, shows, a terrible price was paid for this success by the labourers who serviced the machines, pushed the coal carts and turned the wheels that drove the Industrial Revolution.



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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

Many of these labourers were children. With the mechanisation of Britain, traditional cottage industries, which had employed many poor families, went out of business. Consequently, more and more poverty-stricken workers were driven into the major cities and factories.

The competition for jobs meant that wages were low, and the only way a poor family could fend off starvation was for the children to work as well.

These were the real David Copperfields and Oliver Twists. Beaten, exploited and abused, they never knew what it was to have a full belly or a good night's sleep. Their childhood was over before it had begun.

Using the heartbreaking first-person testimony of these child labourers, Humphries demonstrates that the brutality and deprivation depicted by authors such as Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy was commonplace during the Industrial Revolution, and not just fictional exaggeration.

She also reveals that more children were working than previously thought - and at younger ages.

As British productivity soared, more machines and factories were built, and so more children were recruited to work in them. 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. Those who were maimed lost their jobs. In one mill near Cork there were six deaths and 60 mutilations in four years.

While the upper classes professed horror at the iniquities of the slave trade, British children were regularly shackled and starved in their own country. The silks and cottons the upper classes wore, the glass jugs and steel knives on their tables, the coal in their fireplaces, the food on their plates - almost all of it was produced by children working in pitiful conditions on their doorsteps.

But to many of the monied classes, the poor were invisible: an inhuman subspecies who did not have the same feelings as their own and whose sufferings were unimportant. If they spared a thought for them at all, it was nothing more than a shudder of revulsion at the filth and disease they carried.

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.



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One young boy, Thomas Sanderson, went out to work when his family was reduced to eating acorns they had foraged after his soldier father had been demobilised without a pension.

Another, Robert Wattchorn, remembered giving his mother his first wages from the pit: 'She turned the coins over and over, time after time - and the big, bright, pearl-like tears hung like dew drops from her eyelashes.'

In such deplorable conditions, with their parents grateful for the smallest contribution, most children were glad to help - however crippling the work.

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.

Some were shackled to prevent them escaping, with 'irons riveted on their ankles, and reaching by long links and rings up to the hips, and in these they were compelled to walk to and fro from the mill to work and to sleep'.

It was also legal at this time to capture vagrant children and force them into apprenticeships: slavery in all but name.

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.

Orphaned Joathan Saville was sold as a pauper apprentice to a master in a textile industry. His master threatened to 'knock out his brains' if he did not get up to work, and pushed him to the ground, breaking his thigh. Eventually, bent double and crippled, he was returned to the workhouse, no longer any use to the brute.

Robert Blincoe - on whom Dickens' Oliver Twist is thought to be based - was sold, aged six, as a 'climbing boy' to a chimney sweep in London.

Forced to scale the narrow chimneys, only 18in wide, he would scrape his elbows and knees on the brickwork and choke on coal dust.

It was common for the master sweep to light a fire under them to make them climb faster. Many climbing boys and girls fell to their deaths. After several months, Blincoe was returned to the workhouse. Then, aged just seven, he was sent along with 80 other children to a cotton mill near Nottingham to work as a 'scavenger' - crawling under the machines to pick up bits of cotton, 14 hours a day, six days a week.

In return, he was given porridge slops and black bread. Weak with hunger, at night he crept out to steal food from the mill owner's pigs.



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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'. A doctor who observed mill workers noted that '... their complexion is sallow and pallid, with a peculiar flatness of feature, caused by the want of a proper quantity of adipose substance [fatty tissue], their stature low, a very general bowing of the legs ... nearly all have flat feet'.

The average height of the population fell in the 1830s as an overworked generation reached adulthood with knock-knees, humpbacks from carrying heavy loads and damaged pelvises from standing 14 hours a day. Girls who worked in match factories suffered from a particularly horrible disease known as phossy jaw.

Fumes from the phosphorous into which matches were dipped ate at their jawbones, leaving them with empty cheeks that oozed foulsmelling liquid, brain damage and eventually death from organ failure.

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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.

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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'.

Another favourite gangmaster's punishment was gibbeting: lifting a child off the ground by his neck, until his face turned black. And yet, many of these children showed extraordinary resilience and lack of resentment. Children who worked six days a week spent the seventh at Sunday school, determined to better themselves.

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.



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In 1840 Lord Ashley, later Lord Shaftesbury, set up the Children's Employment Commission, interviewing hundreds of children in coalmines, works and factories. Its findings, reported in 1842, were deeply shocking.

Many people had no idea that coal was excavated by young children. But it was the immorality rather than the cruelty of the mines that shocked them most.

An inspector described how, 'The chain [used to pull the carts] passing high up between the legs of two girls, had worn large holes in their trousers. Any sight more disgustingly indecent or revolting can scarcely be imagined ... No brothel can beat it.'

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 reduced 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.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1312764/Britains-child-slaves-New-book-says-misery-helped-forge-Britain.html#ixzz4xLu6jjZ5>

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