

Research & Writing –

*The Life of the Industrial Worker in Nineteenth-Century England*

The testimony provided to the Sadler Committee during the industrial revolution directly impacted the laws and reform programs that made earning a living wage during this moment of rapid growth throughout the world. Joshua Drake was the first to provide witness, who worked a whole week but was only paid for two days. When questioned, he stated that pay was not consistent between jobs. When asked about his views on children working in these conditions, he informed the board that children only made approximately 3 shillings per week which were not enough for them to survive on; in addition, his opinion on a reduction of hours for children was, although it would result in less pay for them, less work seemed better than reduced pay because of the grueling conditions. When asked why he allowed his children to work, he honestly responded: "Necessity compels a man that has children to let them work."

Matthew Crabtree was next, and his perspective included that of a man who began his work career at the age of 8 years old. He was required to work fourteen hours per day when he first started and sixteen hours "when trade was brisk," all with a one-hour break for "refreshment and rest" and an additional hour for dinner during the busy time of year. He also described the severe physical abuse imposed as discipline if late to work. "Chastisement" continued throughout the day, where an hour couldn't pass without the cries of someone being beaten.

Children were expected to maintain a production pace with the machines they tended. If they were sleepy on the job, the most common response was to whip them. Traumatized by the prospect of being beaten, according to Mr. Crabtree, was sufficient motivation to keep up with production. And after work, there was no time to be with family as food needed to be prepared before arriving home. If it wasn't, they slept until the food was prepared.

Following Mr. Crabtree, John Hall attests to the physical deformities that can occur in the mills where children work. Elizabeth Bently is another witness to growing up as a child laborer, operating since the age of six; at the time of her testimony, she was twenty-three. Her shift was from 5 am to 9 pm when busy, with periods lasting up to six months, working sixteen-hour days when her standard hours were typically thirteen. These days came with a forty-minute lunch at noon, yet when trade demanded, lunch breaks were forfeited, and if the food was not taken home, it was fed to the pigs at the end of the shift, as with Mr. Crabtree, Miss. Bently and her peers were physically beaten for lateness or lacking of productivity.

She was also constantly working in a malnourished state as there was no time to eat breakfast, and if lunch was allowed, she was so dirty, which was unsanitary, and it was pointless to take lunch back home, according to her statement. Dinner was eaten at the mill. With no clock, it was impossible to tell if you were late, but if so, even a quarter hour late, she was docked for half an hour which was half her earnings for that quarter-hour missed.

Peter Smart was an interesting witness as he began as a day laborer and explained that he and the rest of the workers were locked inside the mill during work hours which is a safety hazard according to today's standards. In addition, runaways were chased down and returned to work. He remembered being beaten for such an infraction as one who attempted to flee. Sold by his mother for six years to the mill owner, Mr. Smart saw himself as a slave driver when it was his opportunity to be an overseer. So

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02/21/2023

effective, in fact, that he had the clock removed from the mill to meet his usual quota, which took nineteen hours to accomplish.

Regardless of the amount of work completed or hours exerted by the staff, employees' pay rates remained the standard amount. Employees were worked into Sunday, universally observed as the Sabbath. As overseer, Mr. Smart was compelled to beat the employees when there were exhausted. The children, being overworked if one fainted due to exhaustion, would be allowed to rest for four to five hours if a doctor verified they needed it.

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02/21/2023

### Works Cited

“The Life of the Industrial Worker in Ninteenth-Century England — Evidence Given Before the Sadler Committee (1831-1832).” *Life of Ninteenth-Century Workers - Evidence given before the Sadler Committee (1831-1832)*, <https://victorianweb.org/history/workers1.html>.