

History - Lesson 1 of 4

# Child labour during the Industrial Revolution

Enquiry: How far did working conditions improve during the nineteenth century?

**Mr Olivey**



# Children in coal mines

In 1800, thousands of children as young as four were **employed** in coal mines in Britain. These small children moved coal around in wagons known as corfs. Gas and electric lighting was not yet invented. Candles were too expensive. Consequently, many children worked underground in total darkness all day. There were several jobs in the mines. Thrusters had to push corfs using their heads, leading to horrible injuries. Smaller children, not yet strong enough to push corfs, worked as trappers. Trappers had to sit at small cuttings in the mine, waiting for hours in the dark to open trapdoors for the corfs.



# William Blake

Children did only work underground mining coal in 1800. Others worked cleaning **soot** from chimneys in London and other big cities. This work was incredibly dangerous; thousands of children **suffocated** and died in the tiny, soot-filled chimneys that they were forced to climb up and sweep.

The horrible working conditions in 1800 inspired poets like William Blake. Blake's poem 'The Chimney Sweep' claimed that children were forced to sing 'the notes of woe' because of this awful labour. Blake also criticised the 'mind-forged **manacles**' that London placed on the people who lived there.



# The Industrial Revolution

William Blake's other poems in his 'Songs of Innocence' (1789) looked back to a simpler time, where people lived in small, peaceful **rural** communities.

Blake, like many other artists and poets, hated the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial Revolution was what had created new jobs like 'Trappers' and 'Thrusters'. Between 1750 and 1870, the population of England grew from 5,900,000 to over 21,000,000 and the number of people living in towns and cities rose from 20% to 57%. Millions of people moved from working in the countryside to working in factories and workshops in towns and cities.



# The causes of the Industrial Revolution

Historians do not agree about what caused the Industrial Revolution. Some historians, like Bob Allen, have emphasised how important the coal deposits in the North of England were for allowing the economy to grow. Others have pointed towards the Agricultural Revolution, which allowed the population of England to boom in the 1700s. Some historians have emphasised the importance of **inventions** and **innovations** like cotton **Spinning Jennies** and steam-powered pumps. Finally, the historian Eric Williams argued that slavery and empire enabled Britain's economy to grow from 1750 to 1850.



# Glossary

**Employed** - paid to work somewhere and do something.

**Soot** - a thick, dusty black substance made from burning wood and coal.

**Suffocated** - being unable to breath.

**Manacles** - chains used to stop people from escaping or fighting back.

**Rural** - a place in the countryside where relatively few people live.

**Invention** - creating a totally new machine, concept, process or idea.

**Innovation** - improving an existing machine, concept, process or idea.

**Spinning Jennies** - A machine invented by Arkwright to spin cotton efficiently.



# Comprehension Questions

1. What jobs did children do in coal mines in 1800?
2. Why was being a chimney sweep such a dangerous job in 1800?
3. What did William Blake think about the Industrial Revolution?
4. What changed during the Industrial Revolution?
5. What have historians identified as potential causes of the Industrial Revolution?

