

Primary Sources: Interview with former child laborer in the Industrial Revolution

By Michael Sadler on 05.28.20

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Children became a major labor source in industrial Britain, many going to work in mining and textile mills under dangerous conditions. Illustration: Wikimedia Commons/Wellcome Images. CC BY 4.0

Editor's Note: Michael Sadler (1780–1835) was an English lawmaker and social reformer who fought to improve the working conditions of Britain's agricultural laborers in the early 19th century. In 1832, Sadler proposed a new law to limit work days for children under 18 to 10 hours as children were common laborers in factories and mills often working under dangerous conditions. In 1832, Sadler interviewed Michael Crabtree, a laborer who had begun working in factories at a young age. The following text is from Crabtree's interview, where he describes the cruel and harsh treatment that child laborers endured in these times.

Question: What age are you?

Answer: Twenty-two.

Question: What is your occupation?

Answer: A blanket manufacturer.

Question: Have you ever been employed in a factory?

Answer: Yes.

Question: At what age did you first go to work in one?

Answer: Eight.

Question: How long did you continue in that occupation?

Answer: Four years.

Question: Will you state the hours of labour at the period when you first went to the factory, in ordinary times?

Answer: From 6 in the morning to 8 at night.

Question: Fourteen hours?

Answer: Yes.

Question: With what intervals for refreshment and rest?

Answer: An hour at noon.

Question: When trade was brisk what were your hours?

Answer: From 5 in the morning to 9 in the evening.

Question: Sixteen hours?

Answer: Yes.

Question: With what intervals at dinner?

Answer: An hour.

Question: How far did you live from the mill?

Answer: About two miles.

Question: Was there any time allowed for you to get your breakfast in the mill?

Answer: No.

Question: Did you take it before you left your home?

Answer: Generally.

Question: During those long hours of labour could you be punctual; how did you awake?

Answer: I seldom did awake spontaneously; I was most generally awoke or lifted out of bed, sometimes asleep, by my parents.

Question: Were you always in time?

Answer: No.

Question: What was the consequence if you had been too late?

Answer: I was most commonly beaten.

Question: Severely?

Answer: Very severely, I thought.

Question: In those mills is chastisement towards the latter part of the day going on perpetually?

Answer: Perpetually.

Question: So that you can hardly be in a mill without hearing constant crying?

Answer: Never an hour, I believe.

Question: Do you think that if the overlooker were naturally a humane person it would still be found necessary for him to beat the children, in order to keep up their attention and vigilance at the termination of those extraordinary days of labour?

Answer: Yes; the machine turns off a regular quantity of cardings, and of course, they must keep as regularly to their work the whole of the day; they must keep with the machine, and therefore however humane the slubber may be, as he must keep up with the machine or be found fault with, he spurs the children to keep up also by various means but that which he commonly resorts to is to strap them when they become drowsy.

Question: At the time when you were beaten for not keeping up with your work, were you anxious to have done it if you possibly could?

Answer: Yes; the dread of being beaten if we could not keep up with our work was a sufficient impulse to keep us to it if we could.

Question: When you got home at night after this labour, did you feel much fatigued?

Answer: Very much so.

Question: Had you any time to be with your parents, and to receive instruction from them?

Answer: No.

Question: What did you do?

Answer: All that we did when we got home was to get the little bit of supper that was provided for us and go to bed immediately. If the supper had not been ready directly, we should have gone to sleep while it was preparing.

Question: Did you not, as a child, feel it a very grievous hardship to be roused so soon in the morning?

Answer: I did.

Question: Were the rest of the children similarly circumstances?

Answer: Yes, all of them; but they were not all of them so far from their work as I was.

Question: And if you had been too late you were under the apprehension of being cruelly beaten?

Answer: I generally was beaten when I happened to be too late; and when I got up in the morning the apprehension of that was so great, that I used to run, and cry all the way as I went to the mill.

Quiz

1 Read the following selection from the interview.

Answer: Yes; the machine turns off a regular quantity of cardings, and of course, they must keep as regularly to their work the whole of the day; they must keep with the machine, and therefore however humane the slubber may be, as he must keep up with the machine or be found fault with, he spurs the children to keep up also by various means but that which he commonly resorts to is to strap them when they become drowsy.

Why did the author include this information?

- (A) to describe the role of overlookers in factories
- (B) to illustrate the inhumanity of factory work
- (C) to describe how machines changed manufacturing
- (D) to illustrate the physical difficulty of working in a factory

2 How does Michael Sadler build understanding of the working conditions of child laborers?

- (A) by showing how Crabtree's experiences affected him as an adult
- (B) by asking Crabtree to describe the factory tasks he performed as a child laborer
- (C) by showing how Crabtree's negative experiences are common among child laborers
- (D) by asking Crabtree about his hours, punishments and home life as a child laborer

3 Read the following selection from the interview.

Answer: I generally was beaten when I happened to be too late; and when I got up in the morning the apprehension of that was so great, that I used to run, and cry all the way as I went to the mill.

Why did the author include this selection?

- (A) to illustrate the negative effects of factory work on children
- (B) to describe a portion of Michael Crabtree's daily routine
- (C) to illustrate that children had to work long hours
- (D) to describe why Michael Crabtree was rarely late to work

4 What is the author's point of view?

- (A) Factory work is too dangerous for young children.
- (B) Children should not be forced to work long hours in factories under the threat of physical punishment.
- (C) Factory work is best performed by young children.
- (D) Children should not be forced to spend so much of the day at work away from their parents.