

Working Conditions in Victorian Times

At the start of Queen Victoria's reign, poor children as young as five worked for a living. They did various kinds of jobs, many of which were unpleasant and dangerous. Some children worked in coal mines, pushing trucks of coal to the surface. Others opened and shut doors to let air circulate through the tunnels. They worked in the dark with only a candle's light to help them see.

Other children worked in factories. One of the jobs the children had was a piecer, repairing broken threads in cotton mills. Many fell ill or had bad accidents, which left them with injuries. Most factory and mine owners did not think anything was wrong with giving nasty jobs to children. They had to work long hours with little pay and there were no laws to protect them as nowadays. Children in the country also worked. They did jobs like collecting stones before the crops were sown or scaring birds away from the crops. The hours were long and often the weather was wet and cold. Children were cheap and did not complain. Some orphans and homeless children like chimney sweeps were even sold to employers.

Boys like this were made to climb up narrow chimneys in big houses to clean them. These children would be very young and thin. It was a dirty and dangerous job. Dr Barnardo was a generous man who wanted to provide homes for orphaned and homeless children. He believed all children should be looked after and receive an education. Lord Shaftesbury also knew that it was wrong to use children as cheap labour and wanted to bring in laws to stop this practice.

Inspectors, called commissioners, were sent around Britain to collect evidence from working children. These reports were debated in Parliament. Throughout Victoria's reign, new laws were passed to make it illegal to employ young children. The Mines Act in 1841 stated that no child under the age of 10 could work underground. The Agricultural Act in 1868 stated that no child under 8 could work in a gang of farm workers. The Factory Act in 1874 stated that no child under 10 was to work in a factory, and the Climbing boys Act of 1875 forbade boys from sweeping chimneys. Despite this, many children over the age of 9 were still at even at the end of Victoria's reign. Today there are strict laws concerning how old children have to be to have a job and their working hours.



1. Describe the jobs that very young children did in Victorian Times

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2. Which of the jobs described would you prefer to do?

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3. What were the dangers of working in a factory?

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4. What jobs did children working in the country have to do?

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5. What were the benefits did employers have of employing a child?

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6. What did Dr Barnado and Lord Shaftesbury do?

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7. What Laws or Acts were passed to protect these children?

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8. What differences are there between working conditions now and then?

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