

THE PLIGHT OF MINERS

The conditions under which many workers lived during the early part of the Industrial Revolution are hard to imagine today. The following excerpts are taken from the testimony of two English women who appeared before a Parliamentary commission in 1842.

plight (n) - a condition, state, or situation, esp. an unfavorable or unfortunate one.

The Evidence of Isabel Wilson, 38 years old, a Coal Putter

When women have children thick [often] they are compelled to take them down [into the mines] early, I have been married 19 years and have had 10 bairns [children]; . . . [My] last child was born on Saturday morning, and I was at work on the Friday night. . . .

None of the children read, as the work is no regular. I did read once, but no able to attend to it now, when I go below [my] lassie 10 years of age keeps house . . .

Nine sleep in two bedsteads . . . and the whole of the other furniture consisted of two chairs, three stools, a table, a kail-pot [soup-pot], and a few broken basins and cups. Upon [being asked]: . . . if the furniture was all they had, the guid [good] wife said, furniture was of no use . . .

The Evidence of Patience Kershaw, Aged 17, "An Ignorant, Filthy, Ragged, and Deplorable-Looking Object"

My father has been dead about a year, my mother is living and has ten children, five lads and five lassies, the oldest is about thirty, the youngest is four, . . .

I never went to day-school; I go to Sunday-school, but I cannot read or write, I go to pit at five o'clock in the morning and come out at five in the evening; I get my breakfast of porridge and milk first, I take my dinner with me, a cake, and eat it as I go, I do not stop or rest any time for the purpose; I get nothing else until I get home, and then have potatoes and meat, not every day meat. I [work] in the clothes I have now got on, trousers and a ragged jacket . . .

deplorable (adj.) - bad; unfortunate; deserving condemnation; of poor quality. Verb - **deplore** - to disapprove of strongly; to condemn.

coal putter - the person who places (puts) the mined coal into a basket or carriage so that it can be hauled out of the mine. Today, this is done by machine.

1. Why might furniture have been of no use to Isabel Wilson?

2. The second witness, Patience Kershaw, is referred to as an "ignorant, filthy, ragged, and deplorable-looking object." What does this statement tell you about the attitudes of those serving on the Parliamentary commission?

CHAPTER 25 Primary Source: A Doctor's Testimony on Child Labor

During the 1800's there were few laws in Britain regulating the employment of children (the ~~children~~). In 1816, cotton mill workers, managers, and owners testified before a parliamentary committee investigating child labor. The witnesses included Thomas Wilson, a doctor employed by the owners of a number of cotton mills. Read the passage below from his testimony. On a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

Q: There were 570 persons in the factories you examined, and only one was found ill? How long did the examination of workers take?

A: About ten and a half hours.

Q: For you to have seen 570 people in ten hours, your examination must have been rather slight?

A: It was rather slight.

Q: You found fifteen workers under the age of nine?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think that a lad of fifteen is properly employed, if he works twelve hours out of the twenty-four?

A: I never heard them complain of being overworked.

Q: Is it not, in your judgment as a medical man, necessary that young persons have a little recreation during the day? Does it not contribute to their health?

A: I do not see it necessary.

Q: Your opinion, as a medical man, is that a boy of fifteen can be kept at work, day after day throughout the year, except for Sunday, without hurting his health?

A: Yes.

Q: In your judgment, is twelve hours a day the extent to which a person of fifteen ought to be employed?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you allow, out of those twelve hours, an hour for dinner or breakfast?

A: No.

Q: What is the earliest time, in your judgment, that a lad of fifteen ought to begin his job in the morning?

A: About six in the winter and half past five in the summer.

Q: Do you think it would at all hurt the lungs of a young person, to be inhaling particles of cotton, day after day?

A: No.

Q: How would the body be safe, under such circumstances, from getting those things into the lungs?

A: The particles cause coughing, which brings them back again.

Q: Would not constant coughing be harmful to the health of a very young person?

A: Not slight coughing.

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Comprehension

- (a) How many workers did the doctor examine? (b) How long did it take him?
- (a) How did the doctor describe the examination he gave each worker? (b) How many workers under the age of nine did he examine?
- (a) About how many hours a day did the children in these mills probably work? (b) How many days a week did they work?
- On what did the doctor base his opinion that the children were not overworked?
- (a) What was the doctor's opinion about allowing time during the workday for children

to play, rest, or eat meals? (b) What was the doctor's opinion about the effect on health of breathing in cotton particles?

Critical Thinking

- Drawing conclusions.* Do you think this doctor would have supported laws preventing or restricting child labor? Explain your answer.
- Detecting bias.* What factor might have influenced the doctor's attitudes about child labor?

CHAPTER
25

PRIMARY SOURCE **Testimony on Child Labor
in Britain**

Section 2

During the 1800s there were few laws in Britain regulating the employment of children. Elizabeth Bentley testified before a parliamentary committee investigating conditions among child laborers in Britain's textile industry. As you read this portion of her testimony, think about the hardships she describes.

COMMITTEE: What age are you?
 BENTLEY: Twenty-three.
 C: Where do you live?
 B: At Leeds.
 C: What time did you begin work at the factory?
 B: When I was six years old.
 C: At whose factory did you work?
 B: Mr Burk's.
 C: What kind of mill is it?
 B: Flax mill.
 C: What was your business in that mill?
 B: I was a little doffer.
 C: What were your hours of labour in that mill?
 B: From 5 in the morning till 9 at night, when they were thronged.
 C: For how long a time together have you worked that excessive length of time?
 B: For about a year.
 C: What were the usual hours of labour when you were not so thronged?
 B: From six in the morning till 7 at night.
 C: What time was allowed for meals?
 B: Forty minutes at noon.
 C: Had you any time to get your breakfast or drinking?
 B: No, we had to get it as we could.
 C: Do you consider doffing a laborious employment?
 B: Yes.
 C: Explain what you had to do.
 B: When the frames are full, they have to stop the frames, and take the flyers off, and take the full bobbins off, and carry them to the roller, and then put empty ones on, and set the frame going again.
 C: Does that keep you constantly on your feet?
 B: Yes, there are so many frames and they run so quick. . . .
 C: You are considerably deformed in person as a consequence of this labour?
 B: Yes I am.
 C: And what time did it come on?
 B: I was about 13 years old when it began coming,

and it has got worse since; it is five years since my mother died, and my mother was never able to get me a good pair of stays to hold me up, and when my mother died I had to do for myself, and got me a pair.
 C: Were you perfectly straight and healthy before you worked at a mill?
 B: Yes, I was as straight a little girl as ever went up and down town.
 C: Were you straight till you were 13?
 B: Yes, I was.
 C: Did your deformity come upon you with much pain and weariness?
 B: Yes, I cannot express the pain all the time it was coming.
 C: Do you know of anybody that has been similarly injured in their health?
 B: Yes, in their health, but not many deformed as I am.
 C: It is very common to have weak ankles and crooked knees?
 B: Yes, very common indeed.
 C: This is brought on by stopping the spindle?
 B: Yes.
 C: Where are you now?
 B: In the poorhouse.

Elizabeth Bentley in *Report of Parliamentary Committee on the Bill to Regulate the Labour of Children in Mills and Factories* (1832). Reprinted in John Carey, ed., *Eyewitness to History* (New York: Avon Books, 1987), 295-298.

Activity Options

- Developing Historical Perspective** Imagine that you are a child who works in a textile mill. Write a diary entry in which you describe your work life and then share it with classmates.
- Writing for a Specific Purpose** Imagine yourself as a member of the parliamentary committee investigating child labor in the textile industry. Write a list of questions that you might want to ask witnesses like Elizabeth Bentley.