

Cotton Mill 1830

A roleplay and jigsaw activity which examines evidence of working conditions in an English cotton mill in about 1830. Developed by Jane Bosworth when she was at Winchmore School in Enfield in 1995. Once pupils have worked on examining evidence collaboratively they will hopefully be more adept at searching for further evidence e.g. from the Spartacus website and other local history websites which are increasing.

The webaddress for this activity is: <http://www.collaborativelearning.org/cottonmill.pdf>

Last update: 10th July 2012

Teacher instructions

The class need to be divided in five groups with as close to the same number in each as possible. Each group takes on one of five roles: Overseer, Child Worker, Adult Spinner, Mill Owner or Parent of Child Worker. Each group has a selection of evidence which they must examine to prepare a scene about life in the mill. Groups then present their scene and watch the other groups present theirs. They return to their same groups and work out questions to ask the other characters and each member copies these questions on the proforma.

Groups then jigsaw: they form new groups which contain one person from each role group - if your class is not an ideal number. you can have more than one in some groups. You may want to make the jigsawing easier if pupils have not done it before by planning your groups (e.g. using cards with Overseer One, Child Worker One etc). You could use the names of real mills! Individuals then answer questions in role in turn.

It is up to the teacher to decide when to move to a plenary (if desired) and summarise the evidence and discover which questions still need to be answered.

PS I have replaced some drawings with material from the internet, but suggestions about more suitable evidence would be welcome. You will notice that the same evidence appears on more than one rolesheet. The reading tasks for the different roles vary in difficulty so you can practice what is currently called personalised learning.

Overseer

You are the Overseer. Your job is to supervise the child factory workers and make sure they obey the rules. The more the children do, the more you get paid. Look at the sources on this page to help you get into your role.



John Hall, overseer at a mill in Bradford, was questioned by the Parliamentary Committee:

'At the top of the spindle there is a fly goes across and the child takes hold of the fly by the left hand and he throws the left shoulder up and the right knee inward and he has to stoop his head down to see what he is doing. All the children that I have seen that are made cripples by this work are bent in the right knee.'

A cartoon by Robert Cruickshank 1835



An engraving of child workers being punished. 1840

Fines that could be imposed on spinners in Tydesley in 1823. From a pamphlet circulated by strikers:

Offence	Fines
Any spinner found with his window open	1 shilling
Any spinner found dirty at his work	1 shilling
Any spinner found washing himself	1 shilling
Any spinner heard whistling	1 shilling
Any spinner being five minutes late after the bell rings	1 shilling
Any spinner having a little waste on his spindles	1 shilling
Any spinner being sick and cannot find another spinner (to replace him)	6 shillings

Mark Best, an overseer describes the straps:

"They are about a foot and a half long, and there is a stick at the end, and that end they beat with is cut into five or six thongs.

OVERSEER - QUESTIONS TO ASK TO -

In your group you must find what conditions were like in the factories, and how the people listed below feel about these conditions.

ADULT SPINNER	
CHILD WORKER	
MILL OWNER	
PARENT OF CHILD WORKER	

Mill Owner

You are the Mill Owner. You are often criticised because of conditions in the mills. Some say the conditions are cruel; others believe that the conditions are not as bad as some say. You must get the most out of your workers, not only because you want to make more money, but also because the country must progress. It will help the Industrial Revolution. Child labour is nothing new. Children work in the domestic system. Look at the sources below to help you get into role

Edward Baines, a Leeds business man and newspaper owner wrote a book praising the achievements of the cotton industry:
"Factory labour is lest irksome than that of the weaver, less arduous than that of the smith, less prejudicial to the lungs, the spine and the limbs than those of the shoemaker and the tailor... The only thing that makes factory labour trying, even to delicate children, is that they are confined for long hours and deprived of fresh air. This makes them pale, and reduces their figure, but it rarely brings on disease.

Several owners of cotton factories in Yorkshire employed Thomas Wilson as their works doctor. In 1818 Wilson was interviewed by a Parliamentary Committee:

Q There were 570 persons in the factories you examined. How many were ill?

A Only one...

Q How long did the examination take you?

A Ten and a half hours.

Q Is it injurious to the health of a young person to come out of a temperature of as high as 76 degrees into a colder atmosphere, after having been at work for twelve hours?

A I have never found it to be harmful.

Q Is it a dangerous thing to a young person to be from day to day inhaling fine particles of cotton.

A No

G.Lee, an owner of a textile mill in Manchester, was interviewed by a Parliamentary Committee in 1816

Q What are the hours of work?

A From 6 in the morning to 8 in the evening, allowing 40 minutes for dinner and 20 minutes for grace, making 13 hours work for five days and 11 hours work for Saturday.

Mill Owner

Robert Owen was the owner of a large textile factory in New Lanark, Scotland. In 1816 he explained to a Parliamentary committee why he did not employ children under the age of ten:

"When I purchased the factory from Mr Dale I found that there were 500 children in the factory aged 5-8. The hours of work a day were 13. Although these children were well fed, their limbs were generally deformed; their growth was stunted."

Edward Baines: This History of Cotton Manufacture 1835

"It is alleged that the children who labour in factories are often beaten by spinners or overlookers, that their feeble limbs become distorted by continual standing and stooping and that they grow up cripples..that they are compelled to work 13,14, 15 hours a day. Views such as these have been repeatedly given of factory labour..which have persuaded many to think that they might be true. But this is the exception to the rule."

William Cobbett: Political Register (November 1824)

"In cotton spinning work these creatures are kept fourteen hours in each day..in the heat of between eighty to eighty-four degrees ..children are rendered deformed, and thousands die before the age of sixteen."

Joseph Birley, Manchester factory owner, interviewed in 1832

"There are isolated cases of children being treated badly in factories. Some are true, some exaggerated, some entirely false. It is not in the interest of the owners of factories to injure the persons they employ."



Home workshop about 1880. The whole family are working and their children are working under conditions much worse than would be found in most factories. Parliament was willing to begin the regulation of factories, but it was late in the nineteenth century before anything was done about small workshops.

In your group you must find what conditions were like in the factories and how the people listed below feel about these conditions.

MILL OWNER - QUESTIONS TO ASK TO -

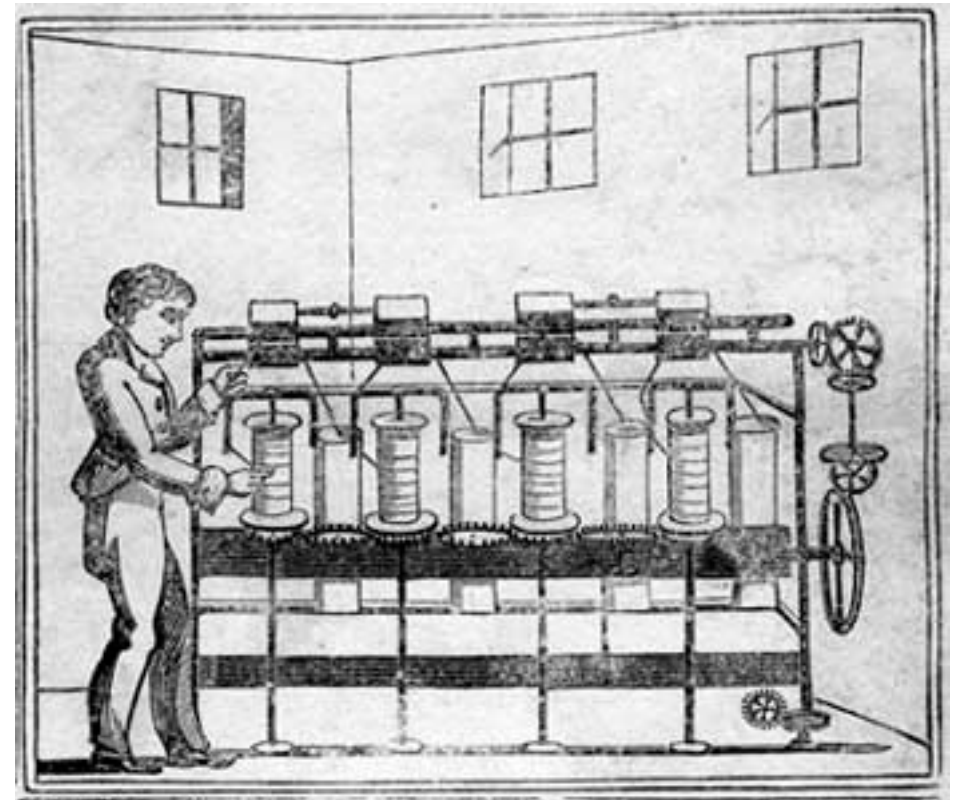
ADULT SPINNER	
CHILD WORKER	
OVERSEER	
PARENT OF CHILD WORKER	

Adult Spinner

You are an Adult Spinner. You work long hours and get fined if you break any of the harsh rules. Your work is very dangerous. Look at the sources below and make rough notes to help you get into your role.

Fines that could be imposed on spinners in Tydesley in 1823. From a pamphlet circulated by strikers:

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Drawing of a spinning jenny

Elizabeth Bentley, aged 23, was questioned by a Parliamentary Committee in 1831. She began work in a mill in Leeds when she was six years old:

Q Explain what you had to do.

A When the frames are full, they have to stop the frame, and take the flyers off, and take the full bobbins off, and carry them to the roller and then put the empty ones on.

Q Does that keep you constantly on your feet?

A Yes, there are so many frames and they run so quick.

Q Suppose you flagged a little, what would they do?

A Strap us. The girls had black marks on their skin many a time, and their parents dare not come to him about it, they were afraid of losing their work.

Q In what part of the mill did you work?

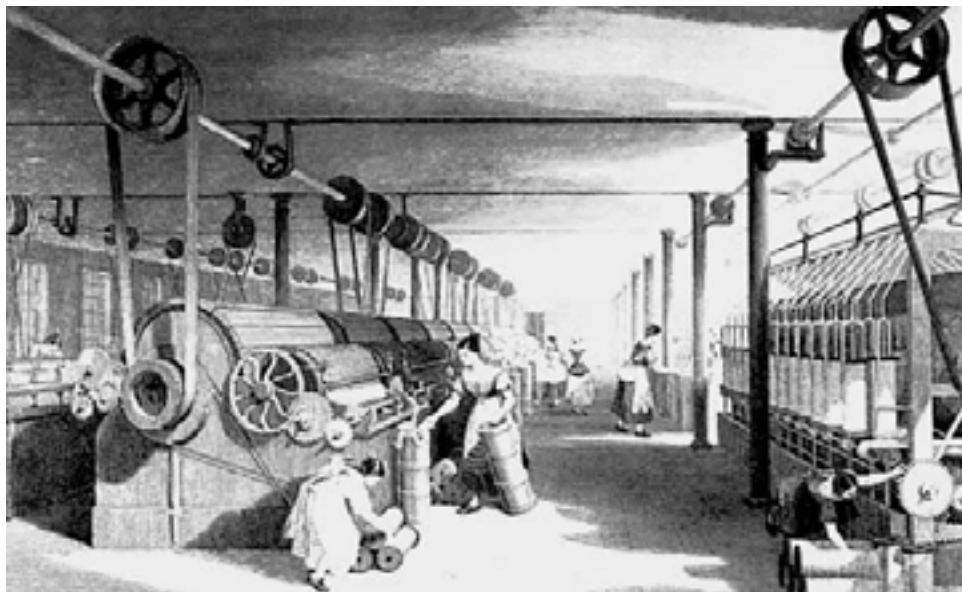
A In the card room. It was very dusty. The dust got on my lungs. I got so bad in health. When I pulled the baskets all heaped up, the baskets pulled my shoulder out of its place and my ribs have grown over it. I am now deformed.

Adult Spinner

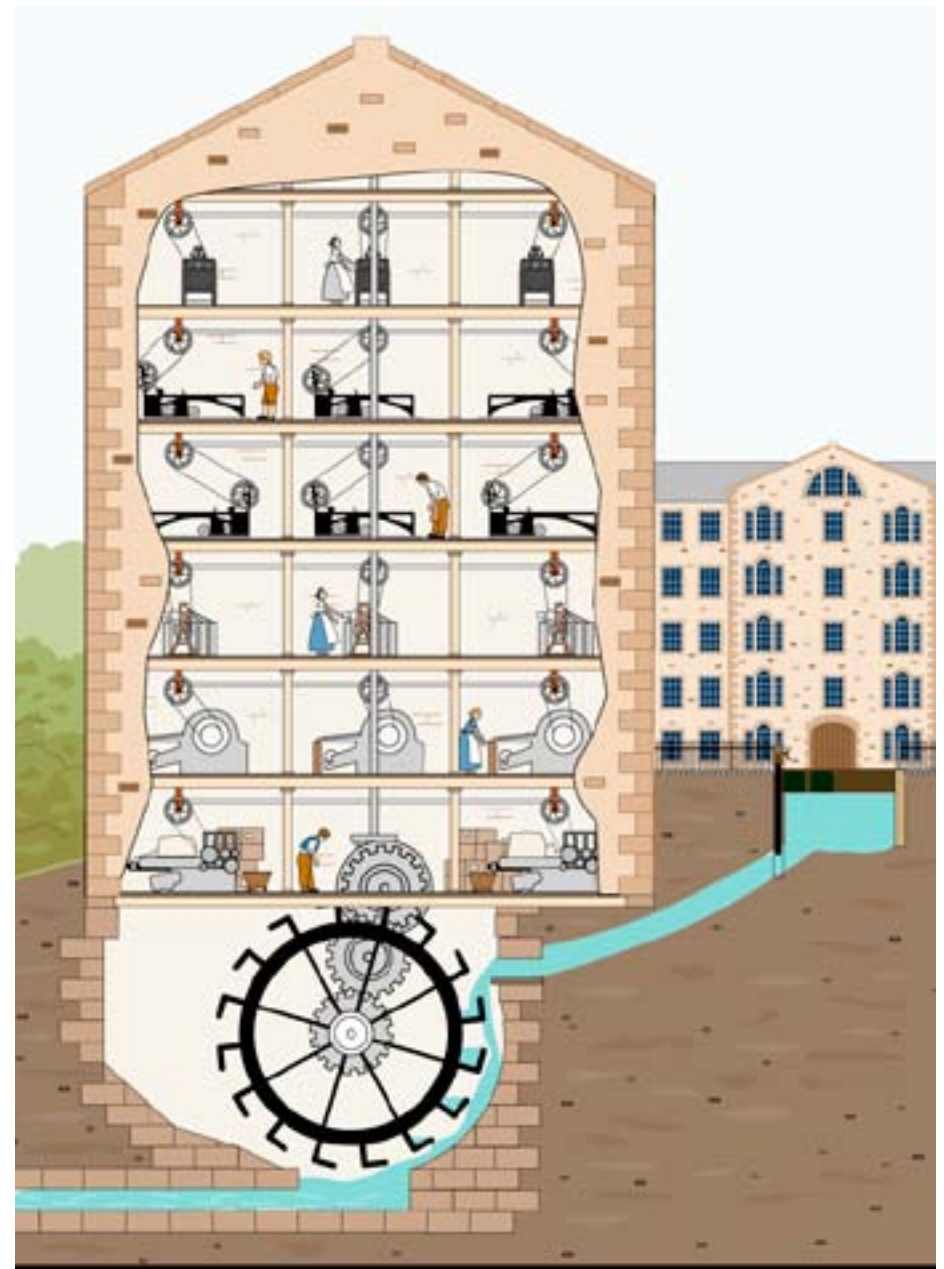


Pauper apprentices in an early nineteenth century spinning factory - an illustration from a novel written in 1840

A cotton factory drawn in 1843



Modern drawing of a water driven cotton mill



In your group you must find what conditions were like in the factories and how the people listed below feel about these conditions.

ADULT SPINNER- QUESTIONS TO ASK TO -

MILL OWNER	
CHILD WORKER	
OVERSEER	
PARENT OF CHILD WORKER	

Child Worker

You are a child worker. You work very long hours. The overseer makes sure you work very hard and do not break the hard rules. The overseer often beats you to make you work harder. As you are small and agile it is easier for you to crawl under the machines to repair broken threads. This is, however, very dangerous. You get paid less than adults. Look at the sources on this page to help you get into role.



An early nineteenth century cartoon by Robert Cruikshank

An extract from the Memoir of Robert Blincoe

Robert Blincoe was an orphan who worked in the mills as an apprentice from the age of seven. He became so deformed because of the work that he left and worked for himself at home. He published his memoir - under the name of John Brown - in 1828. This extract describes his first day at work.

"They reached the mill at about half past five in the morning. The moment he entered the doors, the noise appalled him and the stench seemed intolerable.

The task first given to him was to pick up the loose cotton that fell on the floor. Apparently nothing could be easier and he set to eagerly, although much terrified by the whirling motion and the noise of the machinery, and not a little affected by the dust and flue by which he was half suffocated.

Unused to the stench he soon fell sick and by constantly stooping his back ached. He therefore sat down, but this he soon found was strictly forbidden. His taskmaster gave him to understand that he must keep on his legs. He did so till twelve o'clock. Blincoe suffered greatly with thirst and hunger."

Child Worker



Modern drawing of a child worker climbing under a machine.

Leonard Homer, a factory inspector, describes what happened to a young girl in a textile factory.

"She was caught by her apron, which was wrapped round the shaft. She was whirled round and repeatedly caught between the shaft and the carding engine. Her right leg was found some distance away."

Joseph Herbergam, aged seventeen, was questioned about his work in a mill in Huddersfield:

"After I had worked for half a year I could scarcely walk. In the morning my brother and sister used to take me under each arm and run with me, a good mile, to the mill. If we were five minutes late, the overlooker would take a strap and beat us until we were black and blue. I have seen my mother weep at me sometimes, but she would not tell me why she was weeping."

Robert Blincoe, interviewed by Dr Hawkins on 18th May 1833

Hawkins: What are the forms of cruelty practised upon children in factories?

Blincoe: I have seen the time when two hand-vices of a pound weight each have been screwed to my ears at Lytton Mill in Derbyshire. There are scars still remaining behind my ears. Then three or four of us have been hung at once on a cross beam above the machinery, hanging by our hands without shirt or stockings.

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CHILD WORKER - QUESTIONS TO ASK TO -

ADULT SPINNER	
MILL OWNER	
OVERSEER	
PARENT OF CHILD WORKER	

Parent of Child Worker

You are the parent of a child worker. You and your child have to work long hours doing dangerous jobs. Your child gets beaten to him/her work harder. If you complain you may both lose your jobs. If you stopped your child from working you would not have enough money to live.

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PARENT OF CHILD WORKER - QUESTIONS TO ASK TO -

ADULT SPINNER	
CHILD WORKER	
OVERSEER	
MILL OWNER	