

Children at Work in the Victorian Era



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What was life like for wealthy children?

- Life was quite good for a child who's parents were rich or earned enough money to live comfortably.
- In 1837, at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, only wealthy or privileged children could afford to go to school.
- Very rich families would employ a governess to teach the children at home.
- Girls and boys were taught different things.
- Rich children would have had nice clothes and toys to play with.

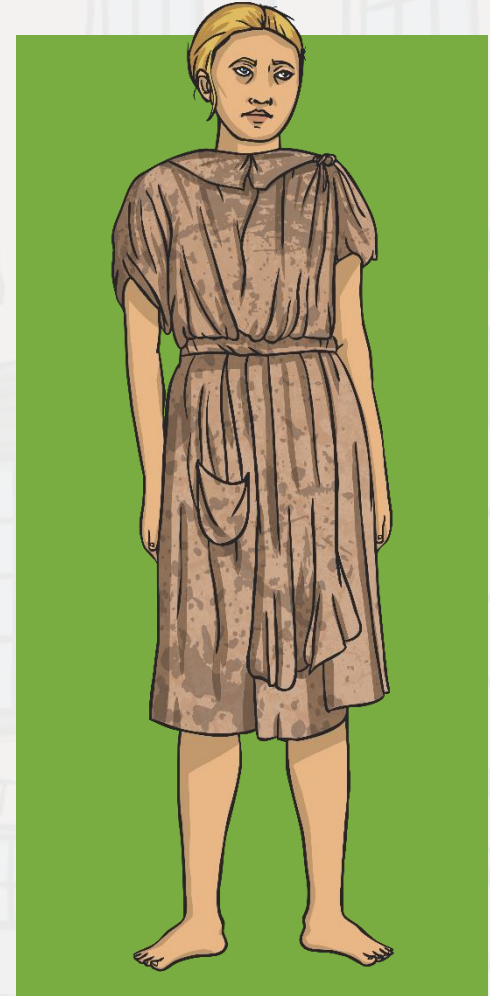


Wealthy children



What Was Life Like?

- Life was very hard for poor people during the Victorian era.
- In 1837, at the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign, only wealthy or privileged children could afford to go to school.
- Poor children, even as young as four years old, had to work to help support their families.
- Most mine, factory and mill owners did not think anything was wrong with giving jobs, particularly nasty ones, to children.
- There were no laws to protect working children.



What Jobs Did Victorian Children Do?



Children did various kinds of jobs and many were unsafe, poorly paid and damaging to their health.

They included:

- chimney sweeps
- domestic servants
- mill workers
- factory workers
- farm hands
- working in coal mines

Children in the Coal Mines

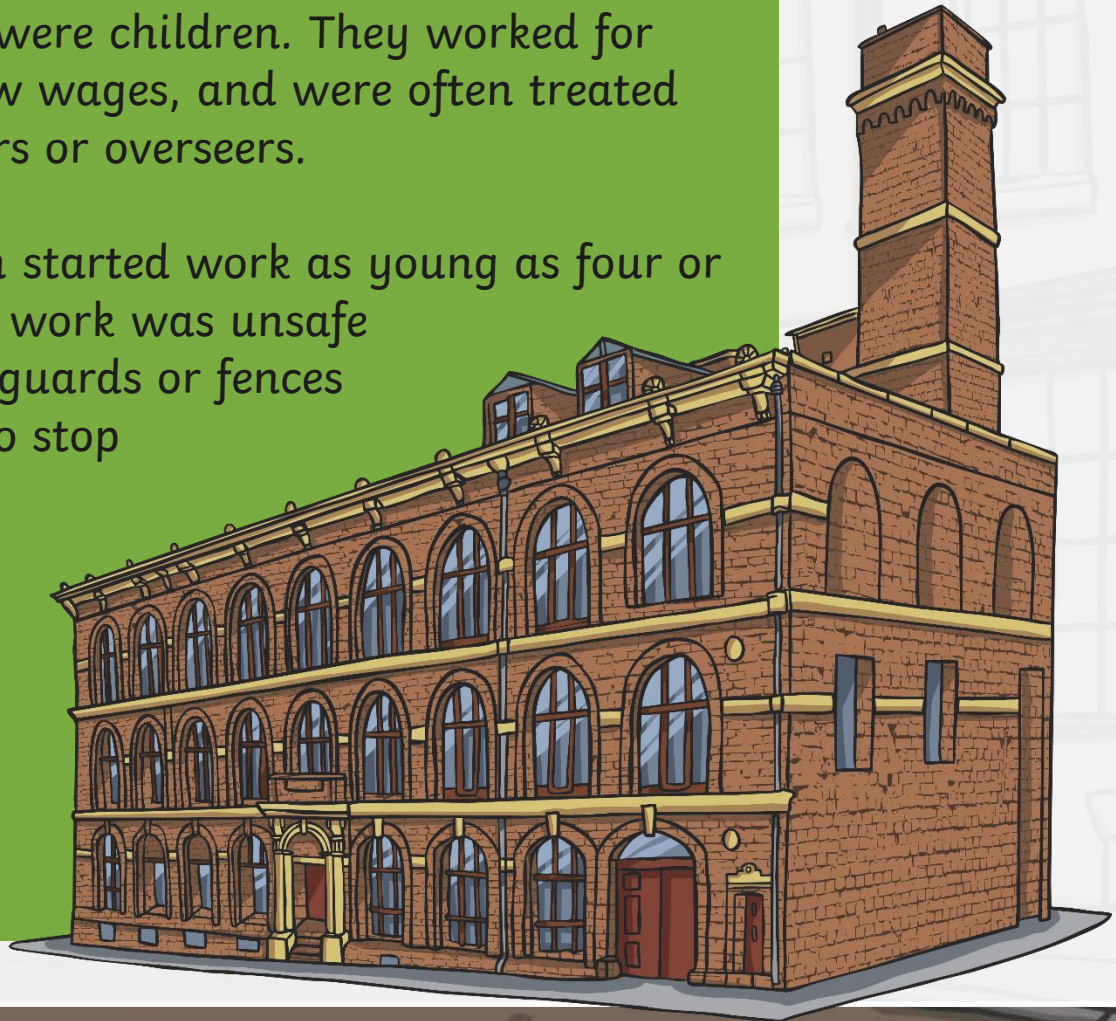
- Many children worked in coal mines. They were extremely dangerous places to work; roofs caved in, there were sometimes gas explosions, tunnels collapsed and workers got all sorts of injuries. There were very few safety rules.
- One of the common dangers for children was shifting coal. To do this, the children had to bring the coal through the tunnels and small shafts. This would require the children to continually bend down and this led to many children suffering growth problems.
- Older children were employed as "coal bearers". This involved carrying loads of coal on their backs in big baskets.
- Younger children often worked as "trappers". It was their job to open and shut the doors in the tunnels to allow the air to circulate through them.



Children in Factories

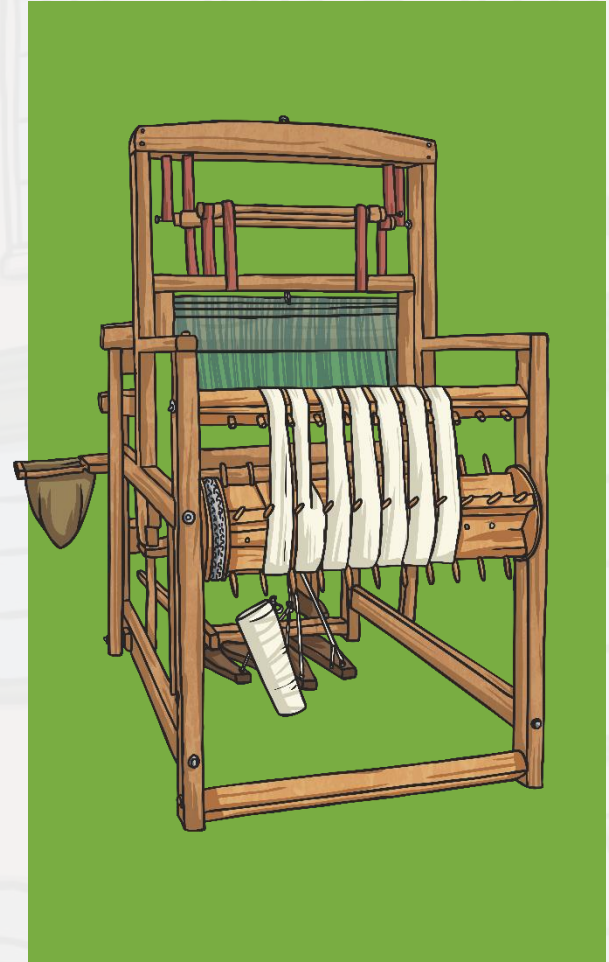
Many factory workers were children. They worked for long hours, for very low wages, and were often treated badly by the supervisors or overseers.

Sometimes the children started work as young as four or five years of age. Their work was unsafe because there were no guards or fences around the machines to stop accidents happening.



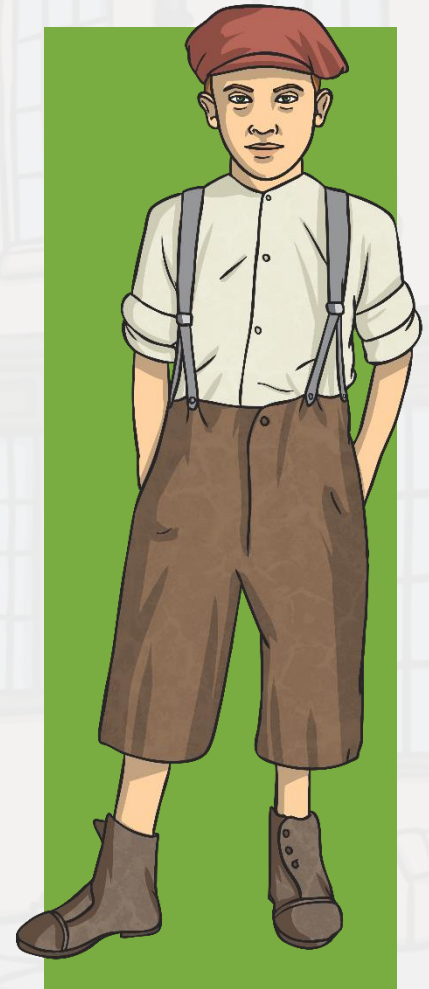
Child Mill Workers

- As in mines and factories, thousands of children also worked in cotton mills. The conditions in mills were very unpleasant. Children spent most of their working hours at machines with little or no time for fresh air or exercise.
- Many children fell ill or had serious accidents.
- Children were scalped when their hair was caught in the machine.
- Many hands were crushed and some children were killed when they went to sleep and fell into the machines.



Chimney Sweeps

- Orphans and homeless children were sold to employers to become chimney sweeps.
- This happened because children were cheap and they could not complain.
- Boys were forced up through the narrow, winding passages of chimneys in large houses in order to clean them.
- Children suffered many cuts, grazes and bruises on their knees, elbows and thighs. It was a dirty and dangerous job.
- In 1832, a law was introduced forbidding the use of boys for sweeping chimneys; unfortunately, we know that this law was ignored!



Where these children lived...



City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, s0372_ss0032_it0246

Life as a Domestic Servant

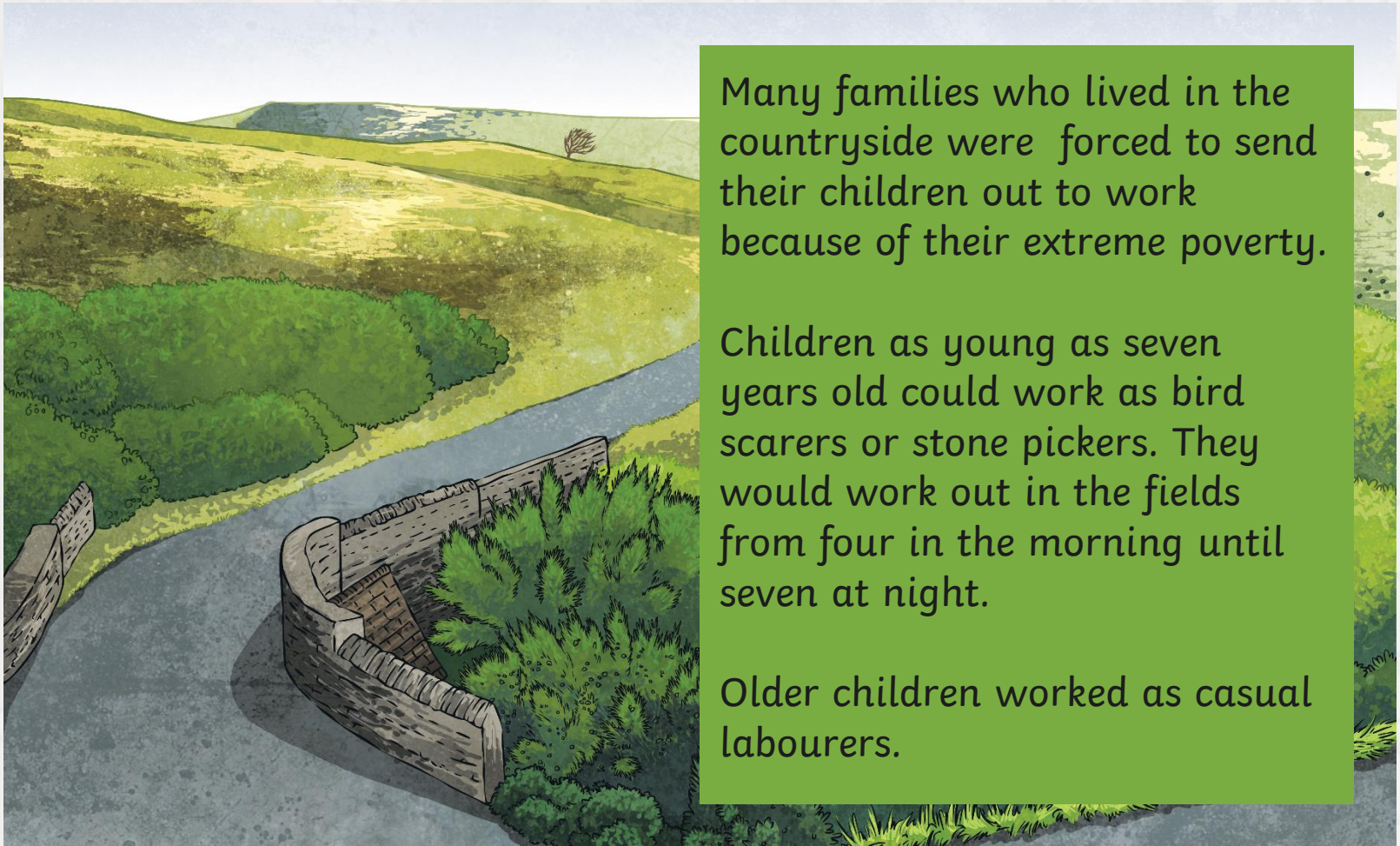


- Many girls from poor families would go to work in domestic service. This meant that they would work for local landowners in their big houses, or for anyone who employed servants.
- Servants were paid very little money.
- Many had unpleasant jobs to do like cleaning out fireplaces and cleaning the kitchens.
- They often had to start work very early in the morning, and could not go to sleep until their employers had gone to bed.

Where these children lived...



Child Workers in the Countryside



Many families who lived in the countryside were forced to send their children out to work because of their extreme poverty.

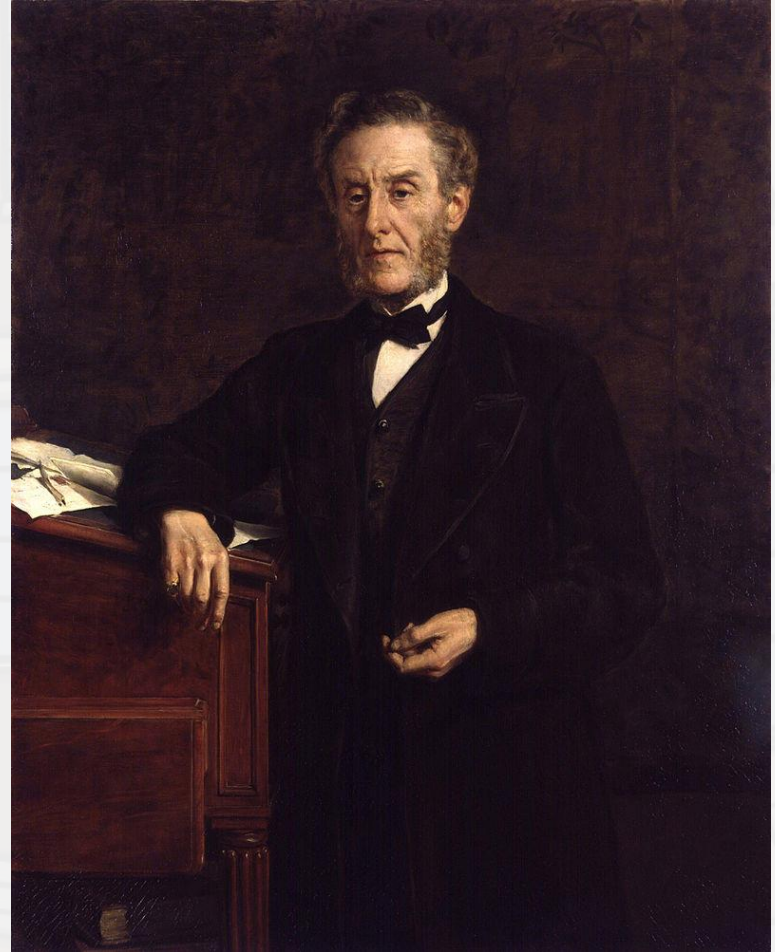
Children as young as seven years old could work as bird scarers or stone pickers. They would work out in the fields from four in the morning until seven at night.

Older children worked as casual labourers.

Who Were the People Who Helped?

Lord Shaftesbury knew that it was wrong to use children as cheap labour. He wanted to bring in laws to stop this practice. He encouraged inspectors, (called commissioners), to go all over Britain to collect evidence from the working children themselves.

Their reports were debated in Parliament.



Who Were the People Who Helped?

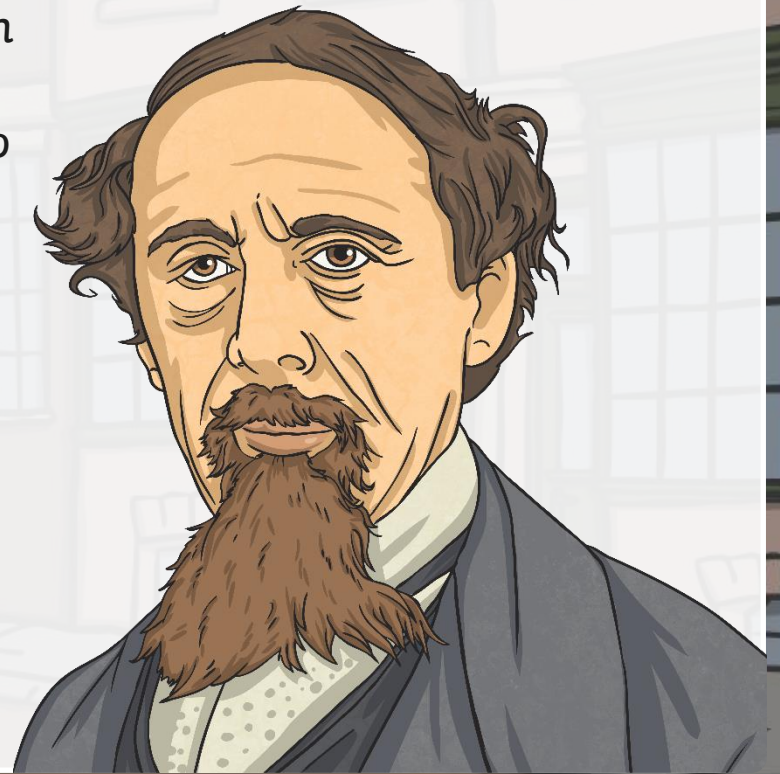


Dr Barnardo wanted to provide homes for homeless, orphaned and abandoned children. He took photographs of the children he rescued and used them to persuade rich people to collect money for his charity.

Dr Barnardo believed that all children should have been looked after and received education.

Who Were the People Who Helped?

- Charles Dickens did much to highlight the difficulties faced by poor children. Perhaps you have read or seen his books which have been adapted for TV and film?
- Charles Dickens would base his ideas on the social conditions surrounding him. He sympathised with all the people who were neglected and unloved. His main focus was how parts of England were poverty stricken and before writing his novels, he visited the places that he based his stories on.
- Charles Dickens was aware of the cruelties children were suffering. He shows this in many of his books.

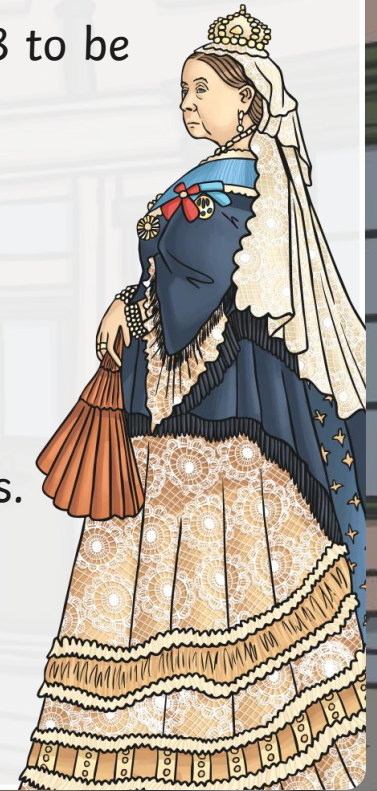


Changes for the Better

Throughout Queen Victoria's reign, new laws were passed to make it illegal to employ young children.

- **1841 Mines Act** - No child under the age of 10 to work underground.
- **1868 Agricultural Gangs Act** - No child under the age of 8 to be employed in a gang of farm workers.
- **1870 Education Act** – Education was compulsory for all children aged 5-10 although it was not free until 1891.
- **1874 Factory Act** - No child under the age of 10 is to be employed in a factory.
- **1875 Climbing Boys Act** - Illegal to send boys up chimneys.

However, there were still many children, over the age of 9, at work when Queen Victoria died in 1901.



The Chimney Sweep's Story

“I started work when I was 6 years old. My mother sold me to sweep for ten shillings. At first, my knees and elbows were all bleeding from rubbing against the sides of the chimney. It's very dark in the chimney but I am used to it now. Sometimes, I get very tired and stop climbing. If the master finds out, he lights a fire. The smoke chokes me and I get done quick.”



The Maid's Story



“We had eight pence a year given to us...we got up at five in the morning and worked till nine at night...We were always locked up after factory hours, for fear any of us should run away...the master started beating me with a stick over the head...I never been a sound sleeper since.”

The Mill Worker's Story



“I work from five in the morning till eight at night. I started work at seven years old. In the first half year, a weakness fell into my knees and ankle...it got worse and worse...in the morning I could scarcely walk...my brother died from a spinal condition after working long hours in the mill.”

What Job Would You Like?

Today, fortunately there are strict laws on how old children have to be to have a job, and about the hours they can work.

What job would you have done if you were alive in the Victorian era?

What job would you like to do now?

Discuss with your partner.





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