

History - Lesson 2 of 4

Changing labour laws

Enquiry: How far did working conditions improve during the nineteenth century?

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The Class System

In the nineteenth century, Britain was a strictly **hierarchical** society. The small elite of **aristocrats** and wealthy landowners at the top of society were the Upper Class. The people who worked in 'respectable' **professions** like medicine, teaching and banking were the Middle Class. The vast majority of people who did hard, physical labour were the Working Class. Now these labels are not perfect; historians today and people in the nineteenth century cannot and could not agree what they mean. Nevertheless, the idea that God 'made them high and lowly' was a commonly-held belief in the 1800s.



Changing labour laws

The kinds of jobs that working-class Britons did was often dangerous and poorly-paid. Horrific injuries were common in factories and mines. Women and children worked alongside men in these death traps.

During the nineteenth century, many governments passed laws that tried to improve working conditions. Some examples include the Factory Acts (1819 and 1833), the Mines Act (1842), the Ten Hours Act (1847) and the Factory and Workshop Act (1878). If historians only look at these Acts, it may seem as if working conditions became progressively better between 1800 and 1900.



Changing labour laws

Sometimes, however, changes to labour laws actually made life worse for working-class Britons. In the early 1830s, the upper-class **Whig** party came to power. The Whig Prime Minister Earl Grey (who now has a flavour of tea named after him) pushed through all kinds of reforms.

The Great Reform Act (1832) did not give working-class men - or any women - the right to vote. The Factory Act, which banned children younger than nine years old from working, may seem like it improved working-class people's lives. In reality, it actually made many very poor families even poorer.



The Whig government's reforms

The New Poor Law (1834) was a huge step backwards for the poorest people in Britain. The people who designed the Act believed that **poor relief** had become far too generous. So they wanted to punish people who they saw as the lazy '**undeserving poor**'. Workhouses were designed to be just like prisons. Workhouses were so unpleasant they were an absolute last resort for the desperate and the starving.

Clearly, we cannot *just* look at **legislative** changes if we want to understand how working conditions changed over the nineteenth century. We also need to look at what working-class people said and did about these conditions.



Glossary

Hierarchical - ranking things in order of their importance or status.

Aristocrats - People from wealthy landowning families at the top of society.

Professions - Jobs that require formal qualifications or training to do.

Whig - A political party that existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Poor relief - Money, food or shelter given to unemployed people.

Undeserving poor - The idea that some people were poor because they were lazy; in the 1830s, many politicians wanted to punish these people.

Legislative - related to legislation (laws).



Comprehension Questions

1. What 'class' were most British people in 1800?
2. What kind of jobs did most working-class people do in 1800?
3. What did governments do to try and improve working conditions in the nineteenth century?
4. Why was the Factory Act (1833) unpopular with many working-class families?
5. In what ways was the New Poor Law (1834) a step backwards for working-class Britons?

