Living and Working in 19th century Industrial Towns

As the population grew, and there were changes in the countryside, so people began to move to certain areas where there was work – particularly, after about 1800 to areas where there were coalfields, with factories being built nearby and towns growing around them.

These areas were in the Midlands and the North.

Such towns were Manchester (cotton), Leeds and Bradford (wool), Sheffield (iron and steel), Birmingham, etc.

Living and working conditions were poor.

In factories:

People worked very long hours when demand was high – as much as 16 / 18 hours a day, seven days a week.

Wages were low – men might earn around 15 shillings (less than a pound) a week, women 7 to 10 shillings (30 – 50 pence), children 3 shillings (15 pence). It was mostly women and children who worked in early factories because the work was not physically demanding and they could be paid less. Many men, anyway, were working at home at the loom which was not superseded by factory machinery until after 1800.

General conditions were at best uncomfortable – the atmosphere in many factories was hot and damp (in mills this was encouraged to help the spun cotton to hold together), stuffy, noisy and full of steam, fumes and dust. Machinery was dangerous and accidents common. Sanitation was limited and yet as many as 500 or more could be working in one factory.

Discipline was strict, to ensure co-operation in poor conditions and to maximise profits – workers were fined if late or if 'time-wasting' (talking, using the lavatory other than when told, etc), they were beaten sometimes, especially children, and could not complain for fear of 'the sack'.